TEMESCAL

by

Henry Herbert Knibbs

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TEMESCAL

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BY

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

AUTHOR OF

THE RIDIN' KID FROM POWDER RIVER,
PARTNERS OF CHANCE,
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TEMESCAL

TEMESCAL

CHAPTER I

NO one seemed to know who Temescal was, where he came from or whither he was bound. Yet there was nothing mysterious about him. His manner was gracious. He commanded respect by conversing elegantly with the intellectual and simply with those unable to appreciate a spacious brow and the finer subtleties. He enjoyed surprising himself by doing the unexpected, leaping, as it were, from hazard to security, and, as frequently, back again. He delighted in matching wits with worthy metal, in being sincerely gallant to humble folk, and as sincerely insolent to those who deemed themselves his superiors. Temescal would have indignantly repudiated the suggestion that he ever flattered any one, patron or pauper. Nevertheless, flattery occupied considerable space among the commodities of his stock in trade, and he was a discreetly liberal merchant. He took great pleasure in performing a kindly act, not, as he confessed, because of its intrinsic value, but rather because its reflection illumined qualities within himself of which he had not dreamed. Yet, if any one had suggested that he went about the world doing good, he would have shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands, and allowed an eloquent silence to convey the impression that any small good which came of his presence

or his activities was as the light of the beneficent sun, a radiation most natural and scarce worthy of remark.

The only mystery attached to Temescal was his career. He journeyed through a land preëmpted by fierce war and fiendish banditry, and he journeyed alone. He paid liberally for such entertainment as he found, answered all questions and asked none. He did not even question his own career, leaving that to slow, incurious Time and the ultimate accounting.

Had Temescal been inclined to make war for its own sake, he might have become a great leader — south of the border. As it was, he had but one man to lead — himself. Consequently, when one of the many colonels of the many Mexican armies devastating the land overtook Temescal in the little town of Cabazon, Temescal was obliged either to disclose his actual identity and business or to assume that of a common soldier. The colonel was recruiting those willing to declare themselves Liberals and shooting those whom he suspected as loyal to the Government. Temescal flatly refused to become a soldier. When questioned as to his business and his political inclinations, Temescal replied that his business was to keep out of trouble, and that his sympathies were with the poor of the land. With the charming simplicity of his kind, the colonel ordered two of his soldiers to take Temescal out beyond the edge of the town and shoot him. To the amazement of the soldiers, the innkeeper of Cabazon, and the colonel, Temescal laughed at what he termed the colonel's ridiculous suggestion. He had been disarmed, but suffered no other restraint. He drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket and flicked the dust from the toe of his boot.

'Had I been unwise,' he declared impressively, 'I should have entered your service, and you, my colonel, would have been a dead man within the next twenty-four hours. I should have killed you myself. Then I should have become colonel. Your men would follow me, there not being among you my equal in presence or strategy — save yourself.'

Temescal paused, snapped the dust from his handkerchief, and calmly replaced it. The sharp snap caused the colonel to start. Of a truth, the prisoner was no ordinary adventurer. The colonel frowned.

Temescal cleared his throat. 'In refusing to enter your service, I have done you a favor. I have saved your life. It is evident that you are generous, and of a noble family. To be under obligation to a mere civilian like myself would doubtless distress you. It is possible to satisfy such obligation by allowing me my liberty. But to maintain your prestige, it must not seem that you have changed your mind. Therefore, you will do me the honor of escorting me beyond the curious eyes of your excellent soldiers and shooting me yourself. Have I your permission to make a confession? Many thanks!' He stepped from between the guards and toward the colonel, who sat at wine, in the very chair which Temescal had so recently been obliged to vacate. 'I shall then be a dead man,' he whispered, 'discreetly dead. Thus you will have maintained your prestige —'

'I shall take care of that —' began the colonel.

'Also, you will have secured my horse, a very fine animal,' continued Temescal, 'and my pistol, an excellent weapon, and the gold which I have secreted in an arroyo beyond the town. Of this your men know no-

thing. Otherwise they might thoughtlessly relieve you of it, after having thoughtfully assassinated you. If my suggestions do not seem comprehensive, if I have overlooked any small detail of military ethics, kindly correct me.'

As the colonel had but recently arrived in Cabazon, and the hour was mid-afternoon, he was sober: consequently able to think. 'I shall attend to this man,' he declared finally, gesturing dismissal of the guard.

Temescal drew a coin from his pocket and tossed it on the table. 'From one who is about to die. Drink, and enjoy yourselves, my children.'

A young lieutenant caught up the coin, stared at Temescal, shook his head.

So Temescal passed from Cabazon, head bowed and hands clasped behind his back, as one who contemplates the dire inevitable. The colonel followed, upon his horse. Nor did Temescal ever again drink wine in Cabazon.

Far out on the desert they halted at the edge of an arroyo. Temescal faced his captor. 'I shall require the use of my hands to find the gold, my colonel.'

'Proceed,' said the colonel.

Straightway Temescal drew a money-belt from beneath his shirt. The colonel frowned, and his short upper lip curled back from his white teeth in an unpleasant smile.

'Not so fast!' he said as Temescal was about to hand the belt to him. 'Lay it on the rock there.'

'As you wish,' said Temescal politely.

'Now sit down and pull off your boots.'

Temescal had not considered the possibility of being left barefooted in the desert. Almost, he lost his presence

of mind. But instead of going into a blind rage and leaping upon the colonel, he gestured acquiescence affably, sat down, drew off his boots, and laid them upon the rock, with the solemnity of one officiating at an altar.

'I trust the boots will not be found too large for such aristocratic feet as they are about to adorn,' he declared. 'You will also find my horse a well-mannered animal. I give him to you, honored beyond words that he is to bear so astute and noble a commander.'

It is possible that Temescal overdid the matter in regard to the horse, which, according to the fortunes of war, was already confiscate. It is also possible that the colonel was not so stupid as he appeared. In any event, the colonel told Temescal, brusquely, to move on — and indicated the direction with the muzzle of his pistol. Temescal's face expressed astonishment — not because he had been told to betake himself otherwhere and immediately, but because of the colonel's discourteous manner. However, there was no other choice, so Temescal curled his toes against the sting of the hot sand, and, with head erect and shoulders squared, marched toward the north.

The colonel watched him until he had disappeared beyond a distant ridge. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Something tells me I ought to have shot him,' soliloquized the colonel as he dismounted and gathered up the spoils. He shivered the least bit, as one touched with the chill of sudden apprehension.

Meanwhile, Temescal sat down beyond the ridge to cool his burning feet. Regretfully he drew off his jacket and cut off the sleeves. 'Were *he* but inside it,' he mut-

tered wrathfully, 'I should use a broader and a deeper stroke.' From the sleeves he fashioned crude footgear. To turn a man out into the desert barefooted was the next thing to a death-sentence — and possibly the colonel had so considered it. But what bit into Temescal's very vitals was the fact that the colonel had tricked him, had discounted his sincerity to the very decimal, and had ignored his courtesy. 'But still, I am alive,' reflected Temescal, 'and that in itself, is something.'

He would have preferred not to progress farther just then, but, accustomed to progress under adverse conditions, he rose and trudged across the blistering sand, wading, as it were, ankle-deep in shallows of palpitating heat.

On his way to Cabazon he had passed through a narrow cañon where there was water. There he had paused at the spring to water his horse, and, as was his inevitable custom, he had raised his hat in greeting to the isolated spring. In fact, Temescal always raised his hat to a desert spring, an isolated shade-tree, or a wild-flower discovered in some lonely spot where flowers were not often to be found.

Without food, adequate footgear, gun, ammunition, horse, or money, yet Temescal was not disheartened. His reason told him that he had but one slender chance in a thousand of getting safely out of the immediate vicinity on foot. Yet something deeper than reason assured him that he would survive to become Temescal again. At the moment he admitted that he did not know who he was or whither he was bound. As to where he was — 'But why mention hell?' he reflected. 'Only a fool emphasizes the obvious.'

CHAPTER II

ARRIVING at the cañon spring, Temescal drank long and deep. His anger cooled, but did not evaporate. Rather, it solidified. He found shade along the cañon's southern wall. He sat down, not, however, that he might plan a way out of his present difficulty. On the contrary, he allowed his imagination to drift toward a conclusion as to what might happen to the colonel, should fortune bring them within rifle-shot again. 'And I trust it will happen before my new boots are badly worn. I paid thirty dollars for them, in Tucson.' This observation in itself is of no special significance, save that it points toward the supposition that Temescal did not steal the boots, and also toward the conclusion that he had but recently crossed the border. Add to this the circumstance that Temescal was journeying south when overtaken in Cabazon, and it would appear that his mission in Mexico was of a purely personal nature, probably inspired by a desire to see rather than to be seen.

He gazed at his mutilated jacket, at his bandaged feet. He thought of going back to Cabazon, under cover of darkness, and surprising the colonel, who would undoubtedly be drunk by nine o'clock. Had Temescal been properly armed and equipped, he might have done so, but his forces, so to speak, were too badly scattered for a successful flank attack. No, he would wait until a real inspiration stirred him to action. Meanwhile, he bathed his swollen feet and contemplated the desert

vista beyond the mouth of the cañon — a wide space of shimmering heat and gray-green cacti and brush.

While in Cabazon, Temescal had partaken liberally of wine. Because of the recent rude and unexpected interruption, the vintage had not had opportunity to perform its proper office. Now, however, the wine served to soothe Temescal's most natural irritation by inducing sleep. Yet he would not sleep near the spring. Possibly he was too wary a campaigner to be caught napping. He climbed to the rim of the cañon, and, after gazing silently toward the distant town of Cabazon, he scooped out the sand at the base of a huge, knife-like slab of rock that partially overhung the cañon, and curled himself within the scant shade. Without moving, he could view the open desert and also look down directly upon the spring in the cañon bottom. He made a cigarette and smoked it thoughtfully. It was his habit to smoke one cigarette before he slept, one upon rising, and as many as he cared to make during the day. The conditions surrounding, confronting, and in fact enveloping, Temescal might be termed adverse, or reverse, according to where one stood and surveyed them, yet they did not disturb his magnificent poise. Naturally he was annoyed, especially when he thought of his new boots and the man who now wore them. As for the morrow? But what was to-morrow, save to-day with a few possible variations? 'Plenty of time for that,' he observed philosophically. 'Meanwhile I shall sleep.' And Temescal slept.

It happened that the colonel had barely returned to Cabazon when he received a message by courier which entailed an immediate and secret journey to the head-

quarters of the general commanding the dilapidated and disreputable army of which the colonel was actively in charge. The general was encamped on a ranch some thirty miles north of Cabazon. The colonel's presence was an immediate necessity. He was not pleased with the summons, but he knew better than to ignore it, so he had Temescal's horse saddled — a much finer horse than his own — and, taking Temescal's money-belt and six-shooter, he set out toward the rancho. The colonel also took with him, as companion and bodyguard, a young and swarthily handsome soldier, known to his fellows as Lieutenant Juan Sepulveda — to the ladies as 'The Charming One.' A colonel may or may not be a favorite with the ladies, depending largely upon his manner and appearance. Juan Sepulveda was not a colonel, but he had the manner and appearance of a dusky young Adonis, while his colonel was not so favored. Moreover, there was a girl in Cabazon — in fact, there were several girls — yet the one and most interesting young woman of the village was admired by the colonel, and she admired Lieutenant Juan. And that was one of the reasons for the colonel's choice of a bodyguard. There was another reason, but it would be an unforgivable digression to retrace and disclose the love affairs of the colonel, or of Juan.

Juan, utterly unsuspecting and affable, accompanied his colonel across the afternoon desert, treating the imposed duty somewhat as a lark. The colonel purposely avoided the course Temescal and he had taken but a few hours before, because he knew there was *no* dead Gringo out there where, according to the colonel's own statement to his men, there was. Consequently, as their

way lay through the cañon, they entered it at its southern end, about a mile below Temescal's temporary sleeping-quarters.

Temescal was awakened by voices. Cautiously he uncurled himself and peered down into the cañon. About twenty feet below him stood two horses. A few yards beyond the horses were two men. One of the men was digging in the sand at the base of the cañon wall. The other, who was garbed like a colonel in the Mexican army, was evidently directing operations. Temescal leaned forward and gazed down intently. What, in the name of reason, were they doing? Suddenly Temescal's heart skipped a beat. The officer was *the* colonel, the very colonel who had appropriated his new boots. In fact, he was wearing them. Temescal edged cautiously out of his burrow. He did not know what he was going to do, but he knew that he would do something. Here was a divine opportunity to rehabilitate himself. His own horse stood below, saddled and equipped for a journey — canteen, carbine, sarape, and possibly a bottle of wine in the saddle-pocket. Modestly Temescal admitted to himself that he was equal to any two men in the Mexican army. And he enjoyed the strategic position of seeing without being seen. He thought of securing a sizable stone, or a small rock — he was not particular — and hurling it down upon the unsuspecting colonel. Temescal decided to follow the rock himself, allowing — so to speak — the other soldier to break his fall.

The colonel unbuttoned his shirt and drew out a money-belt. Temescal's heart skipped another beat. It was his own money-belt. 'We will leave it concealed,

here, until we return,' the colonel was saying to the man who dug in the sand. It occurred to Temescal that burying money in this isolated spot was an extraordinarily peculiar proceeding. He was not aware that the colonel had been summoned to the presence of the general, nor was he aware that the general was in the habit of borrowing sums of money from his officers. But the colonel knew it. Hence these extraordinarily peculiar proceedings.

Temescal frowned. 'And to bury my own money, almost under my nose!' he breathed. 'It is a sign and a token. Something will come of this!'

Prophetic utterance! The colonel handed the money-belt to the kneeling soldier, who took it and laid it in the hole he had dug, and covered it with sand. His back was toward the colonel. The colonel drew his revolver. Then Temescal understood. 'Buried treasure, and no one left to tell the tale.' Temescal thought swiftly. If the colonel killed the soldier, there would then be but one to reckon with. Yet Temescal's generous and humane soul could not countenance the cold murder of a man, even though his own money and safety were assured in the result.

It has been said that the thought is parent to the act, or something like that. In this instance the thought and the act were as twins, born upon the instant. Temescal's blood boiled. On his hands and knees, he heaved his stout body up to leap upon the assassin below. He had forgotten the limitations of his hiding-place. His back arched suddenly against the huge slab of rock under which he had burrowed. Instantly, rock, pebbles, sand, Temescal, and noble intentions toppled and fell slither-

ing into the cañon. Owing to a gyration of the slab of rock, Temescal landed on top of the heap. His teeth clipped together. He saw stars and numerous constellations. And beneath the great rock lay the proud but retired colonel of a regiment in the Mexican army.

Temescal felt of the back of his neck. He drew out his silk handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He shrugged his shoulders — politely — and spread out his hands.

'This,' he said, his thumb touching the rock on which he sat, 'will save us the trouble of digging another and a larger hole.' He gestured toward the spot where the money-belt was concealed.

Neither the fall, the terrific jolt, nor the surprise shook, for a moment, Temescal's natural poise and dignity. It is to be noticed that he said 'us' when mentioning the fact that further excavating would be unnecessary. Thus he implied a companionship which, in turn, implied a mutual interest. Wisely taking advantage of Juan Sepulveda's surprise, Temescal explained in excellent Spanish just what the colonel had had in his hand and was about to do with it when the slab of rock toppled and fell. Lieutenant Juan almost believed him.

'And while I dislike undue exertion,' added Temescal, 'I am willing to prove my statement by assisting you in digging beneath this rock. You will find my gun in your colonel's hand. In fact, he didn't have time to drop it. Possibly such proof is unnecessary, because you will observe that I have possession of your carbine, and you are unarmed. However, I *must* have my boots. Therefore, we shall dig.'

As the still-astonished Juan dug and heaved and

tugged at the slab of rock, Temescal assisted by advising as to leverages and wedges. Occasionally Temescal paused in directing the operations to rub his back. He had suffered a slight strain, but he explained that that need not interrupt his friend's efforts. Juan, who was familiar with Mexican colonels and their playful ways when gold or women were concerned, began to believe that he had narrowly escaped being shot in the back.

When, at last, the slab of rock was removed from an all-but-perfect silhouette of the colonel, it was as Temescal had said — an ivory-handled pistol was gripped in the colonel's hand.

'And he was not picking his teeth with it when I hurled this rock,' declared Temescal, shrugging his shoulders and spreading one hand — the other was still poising the carbine.

Juan Sepulveda gazed at Temescal, at the carbine, and at the colonel. Like Temescal, Juan was somewhat of a philosopher. 'We have two good horses,' he said, and he left the suggestion in the air, so to speak.

'You have spoken wisely,' declared Temescal. 'Kindly remove the boots from this gentleman. I would draw them upon more honorable legs.'

'It would not be well for us to return to Cabazon,' observed the young soldier as he removed the boots. It was only too evident that the colonel would have no further use for them.

'Again you have spoken wisely. Your name?'

'Juan Sepulveda, señor. And yours?'

'Temescal — for the present. I have another. You have inferred, correctly, that we are to make a journey together. We shall require food. You will return to

Cabazon, after dark, and seek out some young woman who will secure food for us. That should not be difficult, because I saw you talking to a rather attractive girl when your colonel-that-was arrested me. However, I shall give you money, in case your good looks do not awaken immediate sympathy. You will return to a spot that I shall designate. Then we shall see what we shall see.'

'Which will *not* be the sun upon Cabazon to-morrow morning,' declared Juan Sepulveda emphatically.

'You are a man after my own heart!' cried Temescal. 'I have wished for such a companion — sturdy, loyal, young, and good-looking. Together we shall do great things! I have much wisdom in the ways of men, although I admit women puzzle me. Also, I have gold, and mature judgment. What can resist us?'

'Nothing, unless it be the army,' suggested Juan.

'The army? Ah, yes! I recall something that looked like an army, yonder in Cabazon. I had forgotten it. However, because of your recent association with it, we shall avoid it, for the time being. Still, I regret that there were not a few more colonels under the rock when I launched it.'

'The rock! Yes! You are a strong man — a very strong man!' declared Juan admiringly.

'When in anger — yes!' admitted Temescal. 'Come! After refreshing ourselves at the spring — in case you have no tequila with you — we shall climb out of this cañon and you shall see where I tore the rock from its roots. I imagine the hole is there yet.'

'You speak of tequila, señor. My colonel always carried a little silver flask, but I fear it is empty. He

drank from it, turning it to the sky, just before we entered the cañon.'

'To deaden his conscience, that he might kill you. That account is closed. However, we shall salvage the flask.'

'With the day,' said Juan, gesturing toward the setting sun, 'I shall take my horse and proceed to Cabazon —'

'Softly, young soldier! You will proceed on foot, leaving your horse, your hat, and your arms with me. Then, if you should happen to be recognized by one of your former companions, you have been waylaid, robbed, and disarmed, and your colonel murdered. Here is money. Be cautious. Should some young woman secure food for you, pay in kisses if possible, in gold if necessary — but not in confidences. Preserve an air of mystery. Convey the impression that you are in great distress. You may be, if you are recognized and captured.'

'As you wish, señor. But where shall I meet you?'

Allowing Juan to precede him, Temescal climbed to the cañon's rim. 'Yonder, in the open I shall wait. Go with God — and return with — provisions.'

Temescal, however, did not wait in the appointed place, but chose a low hill, several hundred yards from the spot, where he kept vigilant watch, curbing, as the moon rose, a natural impatience to be gone. He had still to assure himself that the young soldier could be trusted. 'That I have saved his life means nothing,' soliloquized Temescal. 'Gratitude frequently rebounds in a most unexpected manner. I rescued a small dog

from the jaws of a big dog, once — and the small dog promptly bit me. However, the small dog was half-starved and consequently somewhat cynical. I feel empty, myself.'

Presently a lone, dim figure appeared, marching with its shadow across the moonlit desert. Arrived at the spot Temescal had designated, the figure stopped, turned about as though perplexed, and finally called softly. Temescal sheathed his six-shooter, and came down from his hill, leading the horses. He had recognized Juan's voice, and had surmised that the peculiar hump on his back was a sack of food.

'I might have known that you would be cautious,' said Juan; then, reproachfully, 'but, señor, you might have trusted me!'

'Didn't I trust you with five good old solid American silver plunks with which to buy the grub?' Temescal spoke in our own vernacular, and testily.

Juan did not understand the language, but he caught the import. 'Yes! Yes! And if it is that I have seemed to delay, that is because of Chiquita. She was quick to get food for us, señor; but when it came to paying' — Juan scratched his head reflectively — 'I could not be less generous than she. If kisses could be measured, I think this sack would not contain those which we exchanged. Here is the money, unspent, señor.'

'You have earned it. Put it in your pocket. Doubtless you have eaten. I shall eat as I ride.'

'I have eaten nothing,' observed Juan, rather pensively. 'Entering Cabazon, fear dulled my appetite. Departing, I had no opportunity.'

'But you delivered the goods,' said Temescal, for-

getting, in his enthusiasm, that Juan did not understand English.

From the foregoing one might surmise that Temescal was not all that he seemed to be — or, possibly, that he was more; that his elegant diction was an affectation and the Spanish language acquired. Has it not been said that occasional sojourners in a foreign land become more native than the natives themselves? Yet it is both unfair and unwise to judge hastily, or to become prejudiced by a name.

Juan, however, saw only in his companion a great man suffering a chance misfortune. Warmed by a modest nip of tequila, Juan mounted his horse. 'We shall seek new fortunes together!' he exclaimed, and promptly felt in the sack for something more substantial than optimism.

'We ride with the moon!' declared Temescal, waving a piece of dried goat's meat which Juan passed to him.

Two shadows fled across the dim, ghostly reaches of the desert, bearing south, as is frequently the custom of adventurous shadows. The few faint lights of Cabazon disappeared.

Juan gestured toward a far range of hills etched in black upon the rising moon. 'Beyond those hills,' he confided to Temescal, 'is a town that I know. There they make good wine, and there is much feasting and dancing. No Gringo has yet discovered the place.'

'Yet one may,' declared Temescal darkly. His new boots, made to measure in Tucson, and ordinarily a perfect fit, pinched his swollen feet. Otherwise, nothing disturbed his equanimity.

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CHAPTER III

ACCUSTOMED to night marches and the companionship of hardy men, Juan Sepulveda was nevertheless astonished by Temescal's unwearying animation as they rode down the long, starlit hours that lay between them and the hills of dawn. Temescal sang a robust song in a robust tenor. He recounted many incidents in his adventurous career. He spoke of Heidelberg, Vienna, Paris, the Riviera, as one might mention Schenectady, Troy, and the Palisades. He told amusing tales of prominent characters both in America and in Mexico. He seemed broadly familiar with all that was going on in the world. He discussed the qualities and characteristics of horses, men, and dogs, with an impartiality so humorous and intuition so keen that his young companion did not know whether to laugh or listen in amazement. Then, for a change, Temescal talked about the stars, naming some of them, and illustrating, by anecdotes both ancient and modern, their supposed influence upon men. Yet never once did Temescal mention himself as a principal, but always as an observer.

And, in turn, Juan told of his exploits along the border, and far south in the land, of raids and reprisals, of battles, fiestas, pretty girls, legends of ancient loot, of Aztec mines and undiscovered cities. To all this Temescal listened with polite interest, meanwhile gaining a fair insight into his companion's character; for he who talks of others confesses himself.

When the conversation finally drifted round to their present condition and prospects, Juan was for outlining a definite campaign of fortune.

Temescal elbowed the suggestion aside. 'It is not a wise proceeding to knock too loudly upon the door of To-morrow. It is true that some bold ones have done so, and with success. I have, myself. However, I do not favor haste and importunity. As for knowing what one is going to do, from day to day, that is like eating the dulce before the frijoles. It dulls one's appetite.'

'But, señor —'

'Quite correct. You are young. I will illustrate my contention. Doubtless you have had many sweethearts. Among these there was doubtless one with whom you arranged to meet in the evening, beneath some shadowy tree where even the moonlight would have been an interloper. And there you met her, knowing, as you journeyed toward the spot, that she would be there. Your young heart beat fast. You were enraptured. You thought you had realized the superlative bliss. But wait! Again you strolled along an evening street, alone, and thinking how cruel some other saucy young señorita had been in declining to meet you. It was dark, of course — or it should have been dark. Suddenly you were aware of a presence, a young presence, a feminine young presence, to be brief: and almost instantly she recognized you. You had not dreamed of meeting her. Your heart beat seventy times faster than it had upon the previous occasion. You felt as though you had fallen into a river, and had found a pearl upon its bank when you climbed out. Further illustration is unnecessary. You understand.'

'Indeed, señor! You mean that adventure is like a charming mistress, wayward, perhaps, but ravishing; that her charm for one lies in not being aware of what she will do the next moment, but —'

'Or whom,' murmured Temescal.

Juan's flight of fancy, like a falcon that had struck, returned to his wrist. 'So I shall be content to follow you —'

'You speak wisely. And I am not averse to having a friend at my back. However, there will be occasions when you will lead — in a physical sense. As now, for example. The gray horses of the dawn are tugging at their traces. Soon their blazing chariot will roll up the edge of the world, and then — it will be hot. You spoke of a ranchito, a little way off the road to Santuario. We will stop at this ranchito where I shall allow you to shave me, after we have fed our horses and refreshed ourselves. My shirt also needs washing. Breakfast, a shave, a clean shirt, and a little sleep, and I shall be ready to discover this town of feasting and dancing of which you have spoken. However, when in Santuario, be discreet in introducing me, especially to men. As for the ladies, it will not be necessary.'

'You mean the señoritas will naturally find you interesting, and therefore —'

'That is not impossible. But, no. In this instance you will have the ladies to yourself. I shall keep in the background. As you have no doubt observed, I am solid, and difficult to move. I am, perhaps, what one might call "selective" in my tastes, and only those who appreciate it interest me. There was, however, a girl in San Antone — a most interesting town in the old days,

when a man's introduction was his personality, not his raiment, and —'

'But, señor, what about the girl?'

'Nothing. Friendly discourse serves to cheat weariness. Yonder seems to be the hacienda.'

So they turned from the wagon-road, heartened by the prospect of rest and refreshment, both for themselves and their weary horses. Temescal visioned shade and cool water, simple ranch folk, native hospitality, and many children, who would scatter like young quail at the unexpected arrival of a strange guest.

The ranchito, however, which Temescal had called, in his expansive way, an hacienda, proved a bitter disappointment; not because it was a meager ranch house and a small property, but because it was tenantless, the adobe ransacked, the homely furnishings burned, mutilated, destroyed; the entire habitation devastated.

Temescal viewed the desolation with hot anger in his eyes. 'We shall proceed with caution,' he said, as Juan was about to explore an inner room, evidently hoping against hope.

Juan paused. Turning his head, he gazed at Temescal with eyes somber, questioning. 'I knew these folk,' he said finally. 'They were kindly folk and industrious. Often I stopped here on my way to Santuario.'

'Where there is much feasting and dancing,' murmured Temescal.

Juan shrugged his shoulders. 'We can do nothing here. Let us go.'

'Strange that this desolation should affect you,' said Temescal. 'Surely you are not unfamiliar with this sort of thing. Your illustrious army —'

He was interrupted by a faint, wailing sound, which seemed to come from behind the door of the unexplored room. The companions glanced at each other.

'A cat!' declared Juan.

'Not so.' Temescal drew his six-shooter, strode to the door, and thrust it open. Juan started nervously as he again heard that queer, choking wail. Temescal gestured toward a corner of the room, beyond the beam of morning sunlight, which lay like a patch of gold on the dark, earthern floor.

'It moves!' cried Juan.

'Yet it is not a cat,' declared Temescal, and, holstering his gun, he stepped into the room, knelt and tenderly lifted a tiny, naked infant from the shadowy corner.

'Did I not say it was not a cat?' demanded Temescal irritably; as though it might have been Juan's fault that it was what it was. Then, his voice changing instantly, 'Pobrecito! Pobrecito!' And he pressed the baby awkwardly against his broad chest. He strode to the larger room, paused, then gestured with his elbow. 'Water! Make a fire and heat the water — but not too hot.'

Juan hastened to obey. Evidently Temescal had not forgotten that he was to be shaved before he entered the town of feasting and dancing.

Juan made a fire and heated the water in a broken olla. Meanwhile, Temescal paced back and forth, endeavoring to soothe the baby, which, as Juan observed, 'mewed and squawked' with annoying persistence. Temescal sang softly. He teetered the infant up and down and talked to it. Still it wailed lustily. Finally Temescal offered it a silver piece, pressing the coin into

the tiny clenched fist. The child wailed more lustily than ever. Temescal shook his head. 'Not even for silver will it cease,' he murmured, 'and yet it is a Mexican.'

The sweat stood out on Temescal's forehead. His face grew red. He felt ridiculous, inefficient, helpless. He desired ardently to smoke; yet he could not bring himself to lay the child upon the bare floor, and there was nothing in the way of blanket or clothing upon which to lay it. Finally Juan advised that the water was warm enough for shaving.

'Shaving!' thundered Temescal, 'when this poor little one is vile with dirt, and a living feast for a million flies! Let my beard grow until I tread upon it! The child shall be bathed and decently clothed. . . . This should make you proud of your association with the army. Look upon your work — this friendly home devastated, the furniture burned, mutilated, destroyed, the walls riddled with bullets, the inhabitants doubtless murdered, as is your custom, and this helpless little animal left upon the bare floor to starve! And still you tell me the water is warm enough for shaving!'

'But, señor, it is not *my* child.'

'But, señor,' mocked Temescal, 'it might have been!'

Temescal was not unskillful in handling a horse or a six-shooter, but when it came to bathing a squirming infant . . . He spread his silk handkerchief on the floor, laid the child on it, and glanced round. As there seemed to be nothing less flexible than a saddle-blanket with which to wash it, he unbuttoned his shirt, drew it over his head, and solemnly hacked a piece from the tail of

the shirt and dipped it in the warm water. Kneeling, he undertook those tender ministrations which even an experienced mother may not perform with absolute equanimity. The infant bawled, squalled, choked, grew purple, silent; squawked, mewed plaintively, and, gathering breath, began all over again.

'Of a truth it is passing away,' declared Juan, his own breath catching as the infant, seemingly, ceased to breathe.

'But it will come back,' said Temescal. 'They always do.' And he dabbed away at the squirming and vociferous little armful of humanity, embarrassed because Juan was watching, and irritated because of the incessant howling.

Juan was amazed that a man like Temescal should take so much pains with the child of mere peasant folk. Yet he was interested in spite of his youth. So when it came to clothing the child, Juan offered to donate his shirt. But Temescal frowned down the suggestion. 'I began with this,' he said, gesturing toward the infant, 'and it is for me to complete the task.' Carefully he swathed the baby in his own shirt and carried it to the doorway.

'But there is your sarape,' suggested Juan.

'That would irritate its tender skin and cause it to wail continuously. See! It has all but ceased to weep. Untie the horses! We shall proceed to Santuario. I shall carry the child and shield it from the sun. When we are within sight of this town of feasting and dancing' — Temescal emphasized the latter words — 'you will ride ahead and make arrangements with some good woman for the immediate care of the child. Do not

choose some unmarried and handsome young señorita for the task. Choose a married woman, one that is portly, who smiles, and has children about her. I dislike to seem arbitrary, but evidently you have had no experience with these things.' And Temescal indicated the baby awkwardly cuddled in his arms.

'It is plain that *you* have,' said Juan admiringly. The infant had ceased to wail.

'Not I!' thundered Temescal. 'Nor do I wish to have. Fate has thrust this burden upon me! Fate has made me a father against my natural inclinations. And Fate has made us companions. What would you have done had you discovered this orphan and I had not been with you? You would have been helpless. A beneficent though blundering Design sent me to save this child, which should hereafter bear my name, were it a man-child. Yet I am not to have even that consolation.'

'Then, señor, why not call the child "Temescalita"?'

Temescal's face beamed. 'Not a bad suggestion, from a soldier. You may amount to something yet. Meanwhile, we delay. Hold the child until I am ready to take it.' And Temescal transferred his tiny burden to Juan. Immediately the tiny burden began — as Juan said — to mew and squawk amazingly. Temescal mounted his horse. 'You see, it misses me already!' he asserted complacently. 'Careful! You are not handling a sack of beans.'

As they rode away from the ruins of that which had so recently been a quiet and industrious home, Temescal discoursed upon banditry carried on under the guise of honest warfare. Lieutenant Juan listened until he felt that the reproof was sharpening to a point which

would touch his own regiment, when he interrupted Temescal to explain that the soldiery with whom he had been associated could not have devastated the homestead. 'Bandits; revolutionists,' he concluded.

'Those of the other side are always bandits, no matter which chief you serve,' declared Temescal. 'Meanwhile, this dear land bleeds to death. Would that The Great Physician might appear again!'

Yet their conversation finally drifted to happier themes. The abstract gave place to the concrete, which, for them, was Temescalita, who, for a wonder, slept peacefully in the hollow of Temescal's arm, her tiny body shaded from the sun by Temescal's sarape. And of her they talked, hazarding a guess as to her age, speculating upon the fate of her parents, and discoursing about her future.

'I shall provide for her!' declared Temescal enthusiastically. 'She shall be clothed and fed and educated. Under the circumstances, I could hardly do less for her.'

'But, señor, she is not your child. She is really nothing to you. How are we to continue our journey if the niña is to receive all these things?'

'No, she is not my child,' said Temescal coldly, 'and she is nothing to me. Yet she could not have been more my own had I been her father. And she is everything to me. Had the little one been flesh of my flesh, it had been my duty to provide for her. Now it is more than my duty — it is my absolute and unsought delight. Though the shrill noise she made gripped my very vitals, though I all but wrestled with her to subdue her to the bathing, and though I know that she does not possess those gar-

ments most essential to her age and my tranquillity, still is she the most wonderful atom that I have ever touched with these hands.'

Temescal ceased abruptly, because the so-recently-named Temescalita stretched and actually yawned. He was amazed, even to silence. Then, 'It yawned!' he whispered. 'Did you witness it?'

'Perhaps it will come awake — and howl again,' hazarded Juan.

Yet Temescalita did not 'come awake' just then. Instead, the baby stretched lustily, pushing up one of its tiny hands. The groping little hand touched Temescal's cheek.

'And who says the niña is nothing to me?' whispered Temescal fiercely.

Within sight of Santuario, which had hitherto remained hidden by the low hills, Temescal sent Juan ahead to make arrangements for the immediate care of the child.

And so Temescal entered the town of Santuario, an impressive figure, mounted upon a fine horse. Within his arms slumbered the tiny Temescalita, wrapped in a silken shirt. It is true that Temescal was shirtless, and that his arms were bare, save for the sarape across his shoulders. He had sacrificed the sleeves of his jacket for footgear in the desert near Cabazon. Yet he seemed utterly unaware of his lack of adequate clothing, and oblivious to the curious glances of the townsfolk as he rode slowly down the street. He looked neither to the right nor the left, but gazed, somewhat sternly, toward the west.

Juan hailed him at the end of the street. 'This way,

señor! I have made all arrangements. Yonder in the house.'

'I suppose you have not overlooked the fact that I have no shirt,' said Temescal.

'I had not thought of it. I shall get one for you.'

'To the contrary, you will take the niña and stand here until I return. And when I return I myself shall deposit the little one with its foster-mother. But I do not care to appear before her as a Yaqui of Sonora. Where did you say they sold good wine?'

'There, señor — across the street.'

No community, small or large, is without its news scavenger, usually some doddering mediocrity, who collects news with all the careless gusto of a garbage man and dispenses it with equal abandon. Such an individual, observing Juan Sepulveda standing at the corner and holding a mysterious bundle in his arms, accosted him.

'Have I not met you before?' inquired the gossip, who exhibited half as many teeth and twice as much unshaven beard as the average citizen of Santuario.

'If so, it was not at the barber's,' retorted Juan, who felt exceedingly self-conscious and awkward, holding a bundle which might, at any moment, proclaim itself.

The gossip giggled inanely. 'You are correct. It was at the cantina, no doubt.'

'But not at your expense, or I should have remembered it. Scratch your fleas elsewhere. I am occupied.'

'So?' The gossip's sly, watery eyes hardened. 'And your friend, in the cantina yonder, is also occupied, no doubt. Do not forget, young man, that there is a jail in

this town of Santuario, where offensive strangers may explain themselves.'

'A calavacino swings in the wind. It is cracked and makes a queer sound. Good wine would leak from it; therefore I do not pour. Adios, Señor Flea-Trap. I shall itch until you are gone.'

The gossip departed, muttering. From the doorway of the cobbler's shop he watched Temescal come from the cantina, cross the street, and enter the store of one Estancio, where clothing, of a kind, was to be had.

'Look!' whispered the gossip to the cobbler as Temescal came from the store. 'Is that not the bandit Temescal?'

The cobbler scratched his head. 'If it is not, it is his brother. Let us inquire of Estancio.'

'Or at the cantina,' suggested the gossip.

'Estancio charges nothing for information,' declared the cobbler, shrewdly surmising that the gossip's thirst was not entirely for information. 'We shall talk with Estancio.'

Meanwhile, Temescal purchased a shirt, not of silk, not exactly to his liking, but the best that could be had in so small a town. Tying his horse to a tree in front of a modest adobe, he took Temescalita in his arms and followed Juan to the house, where Temescalita was presently deposited with a plump and smiling mother, who could scarcely number her offspring on the fingers of both hands, including her thumbs. The zealous Juan had followed Temescal's instructions to the very letter.

'I fear this is an imposition,' said Temescal.

The Mother-of-Many shook her head. 'No! No! Where there are so many, what is one more or less?

Juan has already told me the sad news of those poor folk of the ranchito. The little one shall be cherished as my own. As I am proud of all these, so am I proud of this one.' And the señora gestured toward her small army of progressively sized youngsters. Meanwhile, she allowed her fine dark eyes the privilege of admiring Temescal's commanding figure. She sighed. 'My husband was also fond of children.'

'He is away, perchance?'

'Indeed, señor. He is with the Saints.'

'A pity!' exclaimed Temescal courteously, and, it must be admitted, a trifle ambiguously. However, there was cause. The señora was a widow, and Temescal's naturally gallant manner had, more than once, been misinterpreted. He gave the woman a piece of gold, and departed, politely, of course, but noticeably in haste. Juan had to step briskly to keep pace with him.

'Did I not choose well?' queried Juan, wondering at his companion's agitation.

'Too well! She is a widow.'

'But not unwilling to take either the child or money for its care.'

'Or another husband,' said Temescal solemnly. 'She has fine eyes and a motherly way. I know the type. I — she will make an admirable foster-mother for Temescalita.'

After seeing to it that their horses were fed and corralled conveniently near the cantina, Temescal and Juan made themselves comfortable in the purple shadows of the vine-covered portico of the posada.

Temescal rubbed his chin reflectively. Whatever his

reflections may have been, they were diverted abruptly. 'I have not been shaved!' he declared. 'And the good widow saw me thus! Yet perhaps it is as well.'

'Or better,' suggested Juan facetiously. The wine of Santuario was nothing if not 'heady.'

'How so?'

'You do not seem to like widows, señor.'

'Collectively, I admire them. Individually, I wish them well — from a distance. This is good wine. Drink slowly.'

Juan, who had consumed better than twice as much wine as Temescal, laughed. 'As for the wine — you make it go farther, I make it go faster.'

Temescal shrugged his shoulders. His gaze, shadowed by his broad sombrero, seemed to be occupied with the little group talking and gesticulating in the store across the way, where one Estancio sold many indifferent commodities, including shirts; and dispensed gossip gratuitously. Juan refilled his cup and drank, not leisurely, as Temescal had suggested, but with youthful gusto. He called the posadero's daughter, asking her to fetch more wine. Juan filled Temescal's cup and his own. Temescal seemed not to notice.

A pretty girl passed the cantina, nodded to Juan, and glanced curiously at the unmoved Temescal. Juan raised his cup, saluting the pretty girl, and inadvertently slopping wine on Temescal's boots. Still Temescal stared across the way, seemingly oblivious to Juan, to the homely daughter of the posadero waiting to be paid for the wine, and to pretty girls passing and nodding saucily.

'There is wine at your elbow,' suggested Juan. 'I

drink to Juanita Escobar who just bowed to me. She is the prettiest girl in Santuario.'

'Indeed!' Temescal's head came up. He turned toward the innkeeper's daughter. 'A thousand-and-one pardons, señorita! I cannot recall having ordered more wine. However, I am forgetful, at times. My companion has suggested a toast to the prettiest girl in Santuario.' Temescal rose and bowed graciously. 'So, we drink to you, señorita.'

Juan got to his feet from which he was immediately swept, as it were, by his companion's tour de force, into drinking a health to the obviously homely daughter of the innkeeper.

Ignoring Juan entirely, the innkeeper's daughter curtsied to Temescal. 'Thank you, señor. You are kind. And you are not drunk.'

Juan sat down and stared sulkily at the middle of the street. 'But, no!' he observed, imitating Temescal's expansive manner, 'I shall keep in the background. You shall have the ladies to yourself. I am solid, and difficult to move. I am what you might call "selective" —'

Temescal laughed heartily. 'You propose a wise amendment. It is your capacity for wine, and not my own, that restrains me from drinking to all the girls in this delightful village. One of us, at least, should be watchful, even here.'

'I am not drunk,' declared Juan sullenly.

Temescal rose and laid his hand on Juan's shoulder. 'Do you still hold me your friend?'

'Oh, as for that —' grumbled Juan.

'Count the buttons on my new jacket!'

'A trick,' said Juan. 'I can count. There are none.'

Yet, in spite of himself, he glanced up. Meeting Temescal's magnetic gaze, his own was welded to it, and in the heat of such concentration his mind cleared. Still Juan held to the tail of his stubborn mood that now, perversely, kicked to free itself. 'But there is nothing to fear in this place,' he declared, gesturing his indifference.

'Amigo,' said Temescal affectionately, 'you may get drunk, and I shall not desert you. You may play the fool, and I shall stand by you. You may quarrel with an enemy, and I shall uphold your argument. You may even slop wine on my boots, and I shall not censure you. But one thing you may not do and be my friend; and that is, sulk! If I should chance to reprove you, for this or that, and you find neither wisdom nor humor in the reproof, curse me outright. Declare yourself angry, abused, misunderstood, insulted, slandered: sweat out some kind of lusty argument with me. Steal my horse, my money, my reputation — if you can; but do not clench your fist and then hide it in your pocket!'

The sheer vigor of Temescal's harangue, aside from its import, struck the last vestige of moroseness from Juan's mind.

Temescal returned to his chair beneath the purple shadows of Las Uvas. Juan drummed his fingers on the table-top. Presently he rose and strode across the street to get cigarrillos of a kind not to be had in the posadero. Perhaps ten minutes passed before he returned with the cigarettes. His manner seemed peculiarly diffident as he proffered a cigarette to Temescal. And Temescal noticed that Juan's hand trembled as he lighted a match.

Juan leaned close. 'Estancio, who keeps the shop across the way,' he whispered, 'asked me who you were.

I told him you were Temescal, and my friend. He asked me if you were not Temescal the Thief of Cabazon. I serve you and you only, señor. If again questioned, what shall I say?'

'Your hand is unsteady,' observed Temescal. 'See, the match has gone out. Another!'

Temescal lighted his cigarette and puffed thoughtfully. He blew a ring of smoke, a second ring, and a third. 'Tell him he hit the ball on the nose,' he said finally. Then, as Juan seemed puzzled: 'Your friend across the street is keen, but unwise. Inform him that I am Temescal; that it is my pleasure to patronize Santuario this little while, and purchase supplies for my men. Tell him to breathe no word of this to any one. Thus I shall gain much advertising. But it is unnecessary to say anything about the colonel beneath the rock. That matter is settled.'

'Yes, señor. But are *you* Temescal the bandit?'

'None other. And you, it would seem, are my men.'

CHAPTER IV

'BUT, señor —' Juan had heard strange tales of Temescal the bandido, known throughout the northern States of Mexico as a violent man, cruel, brutal, cold-blooded, and so ignorant that he was unable to sign his own name. 'But, señor —' reiterated Juan, staring at his nonchalant and smiling companion.

'Nothing is impossible, my young friend. Your garrulous storekeeper suggests that I am Temescal of Cabazon. Can you disprove it?'

'It is true I first saw you in Cabazon.'

'Quite so. Have you ever seen Temescal the bandit, or talked with him?'

'Not unless you are the man.'

'Accept me as such until you can prove otherwise. Yet, if you are not pleased with my identity, if you feel that our friendship is founded upon a misapprehension — in short, if you imagined me a gentleman and discovered me to be a rascal, let us shake hands in recognition of a pleasant fellowship concluded, and go our separate ways. I am selfish, as are all men, yet I like to appear generous. You are without money and without occupation. Half of the gold I carry is sufficient for my needs. The other half is yours, should you choose to accept it and journey by yourself.'

'But you saved my life, señor!'

'Which is nothing. I refer, of course, to the circumstance. Friendship is not a matter of bookkeeping.'

'And you offer me half of your gold —'

'Which is nothing.'

Perplexed, Juan frowned and wriggled his nose like a dog trying to follow an elusive scent — which is not a pun in Spanish. He had forgotten the chief issue — whether or not Temescal was the notorious bandit — in endeavoring to appreciate Temescal's peculiar line of reasoning. Saving a man's life was nothing. Gold was nothing. Juan sat with his cigarette unlighted, his wine untasted. Temescal casually studied the young soldier's face.

'It would seem that everything is nothing,' declared Juan, after a few moments of troubled reflection.

'Wiser men have arrived at a similar conclusion.'

'I am no philosopher,' declared Juan, using, however, the word 'pensador,' which delighted Temescal as a naked equivalent; for indeed he who thinks must needs be a philosopher. 'I am no philosopher, yet I know a straight road when I see it, and an honest man when I hear his voice.'

'Yet a straight road grows monotonous, and obvious honesty becomes tiresome.'

'To the fire with your philosophy!' cried Juan. 'I will not accept one centavo of your wealth. Fate chose for me when the rock fell in the cañon of Cabazon. Are you greater than Fate, that you can cast me off with a bribe?'

'No,' chuckled Temescal; 'but now you have sweated yourself sober, and that is as it should be.'

Meanwhile, Estancio informed each person entering his shop — in the strictest confidence — that the mysterious caballero who drank wine in the shade of Las Uvas was none other than Temescal the bandit, a great

leader and generous to the poor. 'He came into my shop, here,' declared Estancio, ' and purchased a shirt of the best quality. He paid me liberally, not asking the price. When I tendered him his change, he waved it aside, telling me to present it to the shirt-maker, who, unquestionably, was a very poor craftsman. Only a leader of bandits could afford to be so indifferent as to the cost of a shirt, and so generous to the poor.'

The little group of townsfolk nodded thoughtfully. Estancio's argument may or may not have seemed convincing, yet it was accepted in silence, as most of them owed him money. Finding himself in undisputed authority as a dispenser of interesting news, Estancio enlarged upon his theme. Bankrupt of facts, he drew upon his imagination. This Temescal conferred the favor of his presence in Santuario as a visitor and a friend. His men, encamped a few miles from the village, would not appear during their chief's visit, as he did not wish to startle or offend the citizens by a show of force. The young man who accompanied the great captain was one Juan Sepulveda, who had once been a soldier, but was now Temescal's lieutenant.

'But the bundle which he bore in his arms?' queried the village gossip.

Estancio frowned at the interruption. 'A secret, my friend, which I am not at liberty to divulge.'

And so the news circulated swiftly, as strictly confidential news often does, until Temescal's presence in Santuario was the chief topic of conversation.

The village gossip, finding himself somewhat out of the running, betook himself to the home of the alcalde, the one person in town not in debt to the storekeeper.

The gossip whispered in the alcalde's ear. The sleepy old alcalde mumbled and nodded, nor seemed inclined to do anything else until the gossip suggested that Estancio was exceeding his authority by influencing the citizens to receive this Temescal as a guest and a friend.

'Are we to be represented by a mere shopkeeper,' inquired the gossip, 'when the welfare of our community is at stake?'

This clarion challenge, albeit whispered, awoke the alcalde to action. Calling to his wife to fetch him his hat and his cane, he tottered out and down the dusty street toward the store of his social enemy, Estancio.

'Was it not in the wineshop of Emanuelito, in Sonora, that I sat at wine with him, when he was captain of rurales? We were younger then. And the girls of Sonora —' Estancio paused and stared at the alcalde, who frowned round upon the indolent group listening to the shopkeeper. To frown is the prerogative of a justice of the peace. To ask questions is another prerogative.

'You sat at wine with whom?' quavered the alcalde.

Estancio hesitated; yet the questioning eyes of his audience demanded an answer. Estancio was in too deep to retreat gracefully, and, as there seemed to be no island of evasion immediately in sight, he struck out boldly for the opposite shore.

'With none other than this Temescal yonder, who recently entered my shop and purchased —'

'You are acquainted with him, then?'

'As I said, we sat at wine — doubtless he has —'

'That being the case,' quavered the old alcalde, 'you will introduce me.'

'But why? Are you not the alcalde? Moreover, this

Temescal is a most peculiar man, who dislikes attention and social functions. Even now he sits beneath the vine, talking with his lieutenant, and enjoying himself in his own way. Possibly he will call upon you this evening —'

'Possibly we shall call upon him immediately.'

'But my shop!' argued Estancio. 'Many are here, and I am a busy man.'

'Snuff!' said the alcalde. 'We can adjust that. Miguel! Alejandro! José! Felipe! Fernando! and you Pedro!' — the alcalde indicated the assemblage with a wave of his cane — 'you will accompany me.'

The suggestion met with enthusiasm, save in the case of Estancio, who, however, took up his hat, and, assuming his professional manner, strode out, followed by the tottering alcalde and a half-dozen citizens.

Temescal, who sat at ease, his legs crossed, and his gaze concerned, apparently, with the toe of his boot, ceased toying with his silken handkerchief. He allowed his disengaged hand to rest not too far from the ivory handle of his six-shooter. The shopkeeper advanced, hat in hand, and bowed. Gesturing with the professional suavity of a clerk introducing a wealthy patron to an expensive purchase, Estancio made Temescal and the alcalde known to each other.

Temescal rose briskly, bowed gracefully, and repeated the alcalde's name. Shrugging his shoulders — politely — and spreading his hands, Temescal asked the alcalde if he would not be so kind as to introduce his friend.

The alcalde smiled shrewdly. 'This,' he said, gesturing indifferently, 'is Estancio Nulidad, who once sat at wine with you in Sonora, but whom, doubtless, you have forgotten.'

'Completely!' declared Temescal, turning his back on the storekeeper. 'Señor alcalde, may I have the pleasure of ordering refreshment for you?'

The alcalde thrust his cane beneath his arm and rubbed his hands. He accepted a seat, cleared his ancient throat, and continued to rub his hands until the posadero's daughter fetched wine. Over the good wine they talked, while the little group of citizens stared, chiefly at the lordly and gracious Temescal — obviously a greater man than the alcalde himself, and one reputed to be generous to the poor. Among them were those who hoped the great Temescal might notice how poor they were and live up to his reputation. Meanwhile, Juan stood within the doorway of the posado, apparently uninterested in the proceedings, yet actually alert that none might approach Temescal too closely from behind.

Temescal, turning his head, beckoned to Juan. 'You will see that our good friends here do not suffer from thirst. It is a hot day.' And he flung a ringing piece of gold on the table.

'That is his way,' declared Juan to the group of citizens. 'Always thinking of others; even as he rescued and found a home for the girl-child of which you have heard. We shall withdraw that the alcalde and my friend may converse undisturbed.'

'You call the Captain Temescal your friend?' queried a villager.

'None other!' replied Juan, borrowing both Temescal's phrase and his manner. 'Though I serve him, I am also his companion and friend. But do not mistake that he will tolerate familiarity. Your shopkeeper pretended

an acquaintance with him. And you will observe that your shopkeeper has returned to his shop. There was also a colonel —' Juan bethought himself and changed the subject.

Temescal was familiar with alcaldes and their works from Tehuantepec to Juarez. However, he did not allow the slightest glimmer of ennui to appear on his courteously animated face as he chatted and drank wine, discreetly, and listened to the musty and didactic alcalde drone along ancient highways of local history like a Spanish ox-cart on a mesa road. The alcalde flattered himself that he was entertaining the notorious captain, while Temescal flattered himself that he was preparing the way for a peaceful sojourn in Santuario.

Finally Temescal's patience and his capacity for wine placed the alcalde in a more or less horizontal condition, which was presently rectified through the assistance of two more or less perpendicular citizens who volunteered to escort the justice of the peace to his home. Linked arm-in-arm, the dizzy yet optimistic cavalcade marked time, advanced, hesitated, took a right oblique, then a left oblique, and, finding themselves again in the middle of the road, halted to take observations. Meanwhile, the alcalde wept on the shoulder of one of his supporters, while the other, taking advantage of this moist interim, tenderly lifted the alcalde's watch from his pocket and deposited it in his own. Then, with curious abruptness, the three leaned forward and charged at an immediate rise in the road, followed by six more or less desultory legs.

Temescal sighed. 'And I had but begun to feel the wine kick against my palate,' he murmured.

Temescal

Slowly the hot sun drifted toward the low, western hills. Open doors swung lazily in the faint breeze. Temescal tilted his sombrero over his eyes and stared moodily at his boots. They needed polishing. Finally he called Juan from the cantina and suggested supper. Juan was about to summon the posadero's daughter, when Temescal interrupted with a gesture. 'A too great familiarity with those babblers is not good for us, or for them. We shall dine elsewhere.'

And elsewhere they dined, partaking liberally of frijoles, chile-con-carne, enchiladas, huevos-con-chile, dulce, and dusky-hued coffee, finally admitting that they felt momentarily satisfied.

The evening stars were glowing softly in a velvet-black sky when Temescal and Juan came out into the night and strolled leisurely toward the posada.

'Presently we shall visit the home of Temescalita,' observed Temescal.

Meanwhile, the alcalde slept. He was awakened abruptly by his wife, who seemed perturbed. She thrust a folded slip of paper beneath the alcalde's nose. 'Read this!' And then, not waiting for her husband to find his spectacles, she informed him of the contents of the note, at the same time berating him for associating with men who dwelt without the law. 'And this Temescal,' she cried, waving the note to emphasize her utterance, 'is nothing more than a swaggering, wine-drinking pauper! He demands that you immediately find food and lodging for his followers — twenty of them, fodder for his horses, and entertainment for himself and his lieutenant. He will arrive at nine o'clock.'

The alcalde blinked and stared at his wife. 'But he

has arrived! No later than this afternoon I talked with him. There is some mistake. Let me see the note.'

The alcalde read, sighed, and shook his head. 'I cannot understand it! He seemed a most agreeable person. Make some coffee. I shall answer this note in person. There is some mistake.'

'You might ask him to return your watch,' suggested the alcalde's wife. 'Or perhaps you gave it to him. You made a fine show of yourself this afternoon!'

Glad to be out of the house on any pretext, the alcalde took his stick and a lantern and departed to summon together such citizens as could be relied upon to help provide sustenance for the bandit captain and his men. Being met with considerable protest, the alcalde resorted to logic. 'We give — or he takes,' was his argument. The citizens saw the point.

Temescal, however, was not to be found. Yet he was not in hiding. To the contrary, he was conversing with the foster-mother of Temescalita, chaperoned, so to speak, by Juan, to whom he had said upon entering the house, 'Do not leave me for an instant!'

Temescalita, having been properly clothed and nourished, was asleep. And Temescal filled, in a physical sense, the chair of the departed sire of the little brood of curious-eyed children who stared in wonderment at his noble proportions and magnificent watch-chain.

Following the usual and meaningless compliments, Temescal opened with a direct attack. 'There will be no nonsense about this!' he declared sternly. 'It is simply and solely a business matter. For the care of my adopted daughter I shall give you ten dollars a month the first year, twenty dollars a month the second year,

and thirty dollars a month the third year, unless I choose to make some other disposition of the child.' He counted out twelve shining gold pieces and laid them upon the table. 'For the first year,' he said. 'Take good care of the little one. She bears an honorable name.' And Temescal cleared his throat.

'Of a truth, you are generous!' exclaimed the Mother-of-Many, who had not seen so much gold in all her life. 'But should there be no second or third year — yours being a dangerous calling?'

'I was not aware of it' — and Temescal gestured airily. 'Still, I appreciate your solicitude — for Temescalita. Within the month you will hear from me or from my agents in regard to the niña. I shall immediately dispatch a letter to them. Teach the niña my name. I shall again look at her while she sleeps.' And Temescal strode to the dim corner of the room and gazed down upon the tiny Temescalita. He shook his head. 'Strange!' he mused. 'The child seems to have become noticeably larger in this short while. Nor was I aware that she was of so dark a hue. However, I could recognize the infant among a dozen of her age and size.' To assure himself he leaned close. His hand, outthrust to steady himself, pressed something which wiggled and squawked suddenly. He leaped back as though he had touched a live ember. The Mother-of-Many, chatting with Juan, rose and came swiftly. And swiftly she gathered a squirming bundle to her ample breast.

'I had not noticed the other one,' apologized Temescal, retreating toward the middle of the room. 'Pardon my clumsiness, due to a sincere regard for the slumbers of Temescalita.'

The infant, being led to discover that which soothed its irritation, and, in the economy of nature, occupied its vociferous energies to the full, became as placid as a mildly gurgling brook. Replete with sympathy and sustenance, it almost immediately fell asleep.

The Mother-of-Many smiled benignly. 'I cherish the little one as though it were my own,' she murmured.

'But isn't it?' queried Temescal, staring at the baby asleep in her arms.

'This, señor, is your Temescalita. The other, yonder, is my youngest, Maria de la Concepcion Conchita.'

'I should have at least known that voice,' muttered Temescal.

'Will you not kiss the little one before you go?' said the Mother-of-Many. 'See! Is she not pretty?'

'Not for the world would I disturb her!' declared Temescal, drawing back. 'We shall be going. Tomorrow, perhaps —' Temescal took up his sombrero and moved toward the doorway. As he stepped out, he bade the señora adieu in his most stately manner. The youngsters, hitherto unnaturally quiet, clustered round their mother, within whose ample arms slumbered the altogether fortunate Temescalita. The light of the candle shining from behind the Mother-of-Many cast a halo about her head.

Temescal turned abruptly and strode to the street. Once clear of the doorway light, however, his pace slackened. Relieved that the interview was concluded, he allowed himself the luxury of reflection. 'A most worthy woman, and not unattractive; generous by nature, and by nature generously proportioned. One who

neither slights nor idealizes the duties of a mother; exacting obedience by example — for I doubt that a child finds it easy to obey a garrulous parent. Repeated admonitions have been known to awaken perversity in a saint. Indeed, she appeared somewhat like an heroic Madonna, as she stood —'

'Was it not much money for the care of one small infant?' queried Juan, who imagined that his silent companion might possibly be reconsidering his generosity. Temescal stopped, as one might, who, leading a halter-wise and familiar old hobby, suddenly discovers that the hobby has left him to answer the hee-haw of some vagrant mule.

'Money? Infant? Much money? One small — Of a truth, I was upon a broader path. No, it was not too much — nor enough. Do you think when I cast money upon the table I do not first measure conditions? Were there not six small ones to feed? I —'

'Seven, señor.'

'Did I overlook another? Seven, then. Is it not that some small good has come out of a great wrong? Could those who devastated the home of Temescalita have dreamed that in providing for her I have provided for six others? Yet it is so. Yonder good woman is industrious. Her home proclaims it. She will use discretion in spending the money to clothe and feed her children. Thus will she be relieved of worry. Worry disorganizes the digestion. Worry is also communicated directly from mother to infant. I would have Temescalita become a healthy, and consequently happy, child. Thus you may observe my selfishness in providing so liberally. I do not refer to the amount, but to its uses.'

'Yet the señora seemed to have a good digestion before you gave her the money,' suggested Juan.

'Quite so. And so did I.'

'Then why would not the little Temescalita have grown fat on perhaps five pesos a month, señor?'

'I refer to quality, not quantity, my friend. I fear I have overshot the mark. A too-heavy charge makes a pistol jump. Let us descend to arithmetic. Ten dollars in American gold — thank the illustrious stars — is twenty dollars in the money of Mexico. Divide twenty dollars by seven children — or eight, was it? — and you have but two or three dollars each month with which to clothe and feed a child. And you thought I had been too liberal?'

'I see that you are right,' admitted Juan, who, however, saw nothing more abstract than the light in the cantina up the street. 'She is a good woman, but unfortunate in choosing husbands. Of these, one was drowned in the acequia, one suffered a fatal accident, and the third —'

'Magnificent!' cried Temescal. 'It doesn't matter what happened to him. He is with the Saints. Three of them! Por Dios! I shall instruct my agents to send the woman twice as much as I promised for the second year! The great President of the United States should know of her. He would be delighted.'

CHAPTER V

'THESE deep-bosomed women, with ox-eyes and a motherly manner —' Temescal stopped abruptly and touched his companion's arm. 'We have been visiting with the Mother-of-Many but a short half-hour, yet observe the change in this village.' He gestured toward the plaza from whence came the sound of a guitar twanged harshly, singing, and coarse laughter. A group of armed men, most evidently not citizens of Santuario, clustered about the doorway of the cantina.

'They are armed, yet they are not soldiers,' said Juan.

'We shall investigate by disappearing from this street,' declared Temescal. 'Turn slowly, my friend. We are observed already.'

'Nor are they vaqueros from Los Ojos,' Juan continued as he faced about with Temescal and walked leisurely toward a hillside tree.

'What they are not does not interest me. What they are, may.'

'But, señor —'

'That little word will get you into much trouble some day. This sudden change bears a peculiar significance. You will leave me, and, after ascertaining that our horses are where we left them, return and tell me that my apprehension is unfounded. Then, if you wish to argue —'

'I am not afraid to be seen on the street,' said Juan, who felt that Temescal was the least bit too positive and peremptory. Juan shrugged his shoulders and departed

whistling. This Temescal was a clever man, and bold, but overcautious at times. And no matter who the strangers were, Santuario was always a friendly town. There was a bonfire in the plaza. There would be feasting and dancing!

Crossing the street, Juan met Juanita Escobar, pretty, saucy, and arrayed in fiesta raiment. Juan bowed. Juanita smiled and used her eyes. They had met aforetime, and neither had forgotten the occasion.

'I thought you were a soldado,' said Juanita, 'but I see you have become a groom. You were feeding the horses back of the posada to-day, were you not?'

'My own, and my friend's.'

'Your friend's?' Juanita laughed. 'Would you call Captain Temescal your friend if he were here?'

'But, yes! He is not my master. We are companions.'

Juanita had heard the gossip of the hour. She had seen Juan and Temescal together. She liked to anger the handsome Juan, whom she would presently flatter, then captivate — a simple and effective system and more frequently employed than many men realize. 'Where is your companion, then? The alcalde is looking for him — and for you. There will be dancing in the plaza to-night. If you are not Captain Temescal's groom, you will be there, and you will introduce me to him.'

'But, yes, if you will tell me what all this means.'

Juanita shook her head. She made a saucy mouth at Juan.

'I shall give you a kiss, if you will tell me,' suggested Juan.

But to Juanita the proposal seemed altogether too

one-sided. 'For a kiss,' she whispered and leaned close, 'I shall give you nothing.' And shrugging from Juan's grasp she turned and swept away.

Juan frowned. An impromptu fiesta was in progress. Its music and glamour called to him. Could it be possible that his companion *was* Temescal the bandit, the scourge of Coahuila and Durango, nicknamed 'The Thief of Cabazon'? And if these who drank and sang and made the streets their own were his men, why, then, did the bandit captain hide within the shadows?

A ragged and armed stranger brushed past. Juan followed him into the cantina. The place was dim with smoke, noisy with loud talking. 'Ladrones,' thought Juan as he covertly glanced at the company. One asked Juan to drink with him, and, following the brief ceremony, told him to pay for the wine. Juan paid, receiving change for a peso.

'You have money?' queried another. 'That is good, for I have nothing but this and my thirst.' And the man drew from his tattered shirt that which Juan at first thought was a soiled linen handkerchief, but which proved to be an infant's white dress of fine texture and delicately fashioned.

Juan stared at the garment. 'Where did you find it?' he asked.

'Am I a fool?' said the other. 'What will you give for it?'

'No, I am a fool,' declared Juan, and he proffered a peso which the ragged one quickly accepted. Juan tucked the tiny garment in his pocket. 'You serve Temescal?' queried Juan as they drank together.

'None other!'

Juan started as though another and more resonant voice had spoken. He turned to go when some one in the street cried, 'Viva Temescal!' and the salute was reiterated hoarsely by those about him. Juan was crowded to the doorway, out into the street. Mounted on a big horse was a broad man, a thick man, who sat solidly in the saddle, paying no attention whatever to the shouting of the people. 'Bueno suerte, Temescal!' cried a man at Juan's elbow. And 'A lo lejos, Temescal!' cried another; and those roundabout laughed at the jest. Yet not until the thick man had dismounted in front of the posada, and had given the reins to one of his followers, did Juan realize that this captain was not the Temescal he knew.

'Where is this alcalde?' queried the thick man, seating himself in the chair which the other Temescal had so recently occupied.

The old alcalde tottered up. 'Here, señor. I was just about to ask your lieutenant there —'

'My lieutenant? Know, then, weazened one, that my lieutenant is in camp.'

'Then who are you?' — and the alcalde turned to Juan.

'Yes, who are you?' growled the thick man.

'Juan Sepulveda.'

'That answers nothing! Pablo! Miguel!'

The two called upon seized Juan's arms and led him up to the table.

'So, then, you are my lieutenant?'

'It is a mistake,' said Juan. 'I am no man's lieutenant. I am but visiting here in Santuario.'

'But this young man is your lieutenant,' insisted the alcalde, deceived by the resemblance of the one Temes-

cal to the other. 'Was he not with you this afternoon when we had wine together — and my watch disappeared?'

'You drool like a broken egg!' The captain waved the alcalde aside.

But the alcalde was not to be silenced. 'This young man entered our town to-day with one who called himself Temescal. If you are not the man, then I am blind. However, you then said nothing about quartering your men upon us, but hinted that you wished to be left to yourself to enjoy the peace and quiet of the village. Then, much to my surprise, you send me a note, demanding provisions for your men and fodder for your horses. Following which —'

The bandit captain raised his hand. 'Girl-face, whom do you serve?'

'Temescal!' declared Juan.

'You lie!'

'Not so!' declared a voice from within the posada.

Attention, hitherto centered on the bandit captain and Juan, lifted to behold a broad-shouldered, impressive figure standing nonchalantly in the doorway. As Juan stared, recognizing the voice, the figure seemed to grow less distinct of outline, for the very good reason that the posadero's daughter, able to resist neither Temescal's persuasive manner nor the gold piece, proffered with a hint that she could purchase a pretty dress with it, had been slowly turning down the one lamp in the outer room, unobserved, and unhindered because her father had wisely ordered her from the cantina next door. The captain, whose back was toward the doorway, was obliged to take a great deal for granted. Nearly all

his men were either in the cantina drinking, or in the plaza, dancing. Two of them, it is true, were present, but engaged in holding the prisoner.

'My friend whom you detain,' continued the voice pleasantly, 'does not lie. Nor do I when I say that you are a murderer, a blackguard, a drunkard, a thief, and an impostor. You call yourself Temescal. Dogs also bark. Had you brains with which to reason, I should be happy to discuss the present situation with you. But you are of the gente sin cabron — therefore it would be labor lost to shoot you through the head. First, you will order the he-goats who detain my companion to release him. But let them make one movement toward hostility and you are a dead thief. My companion will now step from between Don Rag-Shirt and Don Flea-Trap and stand behind them that he may breathe more freely. So! You may be curious as to the authority which commands you. Know, then, stealer-of-eggs, that I am Temescal of Cabazon, protector of —'

'Quedado! Guardarse!' cried Juan, as the bandit captain leapt from his chair and, whirling, fired at the voice in the darkened doorway. Yet, where the voice had been, Temescal was not. Rather, he was halfway down the room. 'Through, and follow!' he cried. Juan lunged for the doorway. One of the bandit's guards caught his arm. 'Have it, then!' cried Juan, who had jerked his pistol from beneath his armpit. The man went down in a writhing heap. Juan jumped over him and backed into the posada. His pistol barked like a startled watch-dog.

'Go, while there is time!' he called to Temescal, who was firing at the flashes in the doorway.

Juan felt a hot pain sear his shoulder. His pistol was empty. Turning, he stumbled to the rear of the room. He heard shouting and the sound of hurrying feet; then Temescal's voice behind him. 'Idiot! Through the patio, to the horses!'

Accustomed to hazard, the companions were in the saddle and spurring for the open before it was known in which direction they had gone.

South they pounded through the night, across the great plateau known as 'The Plain of the Padres.' Juan rode in the lead, being more or less familiar with the country. When the pace finally slackened to a trot, Juan employed himself in speculating as to how their horses had happened to be saddled and ready in the very nick of chance; and, further, how it had come about that Temescal had so opportunely taken possession of the front room of the posada. Temescal must have saddled the horses, aware that danger threatened. Juan felt contrite, ashamed of himself for having doubted the judgment of his friend. Had not Temescal told him to see that the horses were where they had been left and to return and tell him that he had been mistaken in apprehending danger?

Juan thrust his hand beneath his shirt. His shoulder was numb. The strength of the wine he had taken was evaporating. Presently Temescal took the lead, pushing his horse steadily, but never beyond a trot. Juan followed, his head drooping, then coming up sharply as a thrust of pain awakened him. The night seemed endless, and the dawn a grim harbinger of disaster as it glimmered across a barren land and wild. Burial-place of many historic adventurers of both cross and sword, the

Plain of the Padres offered neither food nor shelter from the advancing sun.

Feeling that he could not much longer endure the fatigue and pain, Juan spurred to Temescal's side. 'I am wounded,' he said.

'Ride!' said Temescal, and sped on.

A half-hour, and again Juan spurred up to Temescal's pace.

'Señor, I bleed,' he said, gesturing toward his shoulder.

'Ride!' said Temescal, not turning his head.

Again Juan dropped behind, the reins loose on the horse's neck, his hands clinging to the saddle-horn. He glanced down at his arm. The dark stain, but recently a spot, had spread nearly to his wrist. Yet it was not the realization of his injury, but the actual pain that made him sick and faint.

Finally, in a last desperate effort to check his companion long enough at least to bandage his wound, Juan spurred up close. 'I can go no farther,' he said, swaying forward as both horses slowed to a walk.

Instantly Temescal reined up and dismounted. 'Idiot!' he thundered, 'why did you not say so?'

Juan's only answer was to slip from the saddle into Temescal's stout arms. 'Those ladrones almost winged a pigeon — but not quite,' muttered Temescal as he bathed the wound with their precious canteen water. Searching for something with which to bandage it, he came upon a handful of fine, soft material folded and tucked into Juan's pocket. A handkerchief, a keepsake from some girl . . . Temescal unfolded the tiny garment which Juan, through sentiment, had bought from the ragged one in Santuario. 'But, no!' reflected Temescal,

shaking his head, 'it would seem that another has the true keepsake, and this is but a reminder of it. This baby's dress is a fine garment, and it is a shame to tear it: but necessity is no respecter of fine linen. I had a most excellent shirt, myself, but recently.'

A nip of peach brandy from Temescal's silver flask, and Juan's eyelids fluttered open. 'Is it you, señor?' he murmured faintly. 'I had thought I was with the Saints.'

'Better luck next time, amigo. Moreover, it is hard digging hereabout, so I decided to take you with me.'

'But, señor —'

'No, we are not followed. Naught but the sunlight rides the mesa between us and our escape. Worry promotes fever. Cool your wound with the assurance that we are safe for the present. Another nip of brandy — so!'

'You have no wound, señor?'

'Not a scratch. A hole or two in my new jacket — mere misplaced button-holes. Do you feel stronger?'

'I feel like a fool. I doubted your judgment —'

'The bullet is a hard teacher. You have lost a little blood, which is nothing compared with gaining a little wisdom. And remember — courage is valueless without judgment. A bull has courage, yet a little man on foot can outgeneral and destroy him. But we are not here to talk. Up now! Lean on me! A foot in the stirrup, and you are your own man again.'

Juan Sepulveda, still a bit shaky, yet inspired by Temescal's hardy example, again followed, slowly, viewing the broad straight back of his companion with feelings of respect and affection. To serve such a man was a privilege, were he rascal or saint, or a composite of

both mixed judiciously. Henceforth there would be no arguing, Juan decided: no dalliance with pretty girls when his companion sent him upon an errand, and no dalliance with wine when war was all about them. Juan's to-morrow was bristling with good intentions.

CHAPTER VI

A THIN skein of smoke first called their attention to the hacienda — or such they imagined it until near enough to determine the huddle of low buildings and unfenced acres roundabout as neither ranch nor inn.

Temescal, who had been observing the place with much curiosity, dismounted within a half-mile of it and divested himself of his money-belt. 'I shall leave it here, beneath this flat rock,' he said, 'close to the road. Mark the spot. Should I have the misfortune to depart hurriedly from this world, the gold will then be yours.'

'But, señor, in such a case I should not survive you.'

'You might — in spite of yourself. Many a doting wife has said as much — and, widowed, lived to marry a better man.'

'Would the gold not be safer farther from the road?'

'Not as safe. I have dismounted to tighten the cincha — thus. My horse is restless and tramples out my tracks — thus. I have not set foot off the road to tell of other purpose in dismounting.'

'But, señor, we cross the Plain of the Padres. None but simple folk would live out here in this lonely land.'

'I shall not argue the question. Use your eyes. What do you see?' Temescal mounted and urged his horse forward.

'I see spots dancing before my eyes like gnats in a sunbeam,' replied the literal Juan.

'Poetic — but irrelevant. Look farther.'

'I see a house and outbuildings, yet there are no fields enclosed and little cultivated land.'

'No sheep, cattle, goats, or a sign of husbandry?' queried Temescal.

'Of a truth, it is but a poor land.'

'Of a truth, it is rich in mischief,' declared Temescal positively.

'You speak as though you knew the place, señor.'

'I have seen it but this once — yet I know it' — and Temescal included the immediate vista in a broad gesture. 'The man who lives in a place like this, and does not till the soil, or keep sheep or goats or cattle, lives by his wits. He is far from all law except his own. To be contented with such a home implies villainy, or stupidity, which is equally dangerous. Use your eyes.'

'Had I your brains!' said Juan.

'Nonsense. And what a mess you would make of them! Be glad that your own are in their original shell. Thinking by proxy is one of the great sins of humanity. We draw near to the house. Remember, a wounded man is always under suspicion. Carry yourself as naturally as your wound will permit. You are Juan Sepulveda, as usual. I am, for the time being, Pedro Importunio. They will understand "Pedro."'

A swarthy native, hollow-cheeked, and with a sunken, red slit where an eye should have been, stared across his nose at the strangers like a suspicious dog peering round the corner of a house. Temescal, anxious to have their horses fed and to inspect and attend to Juan's wound more thoroughly, ignored his immediate antipathy for the man, asking him if they might have breakfast and fodder for their horses.

'We have nothing to sell,' said the hollow-cheeked man.

'Nor have I,' declared Temescal, 'because what I have to offer so far from a town is priceless.' He unscrewed the top of his silver flask and filled it with brandy. 'Here, taste of it! Consider yourself *my* guest. I appreciate your hesitancy in the matter of breakfast and horse-feed. You are an honest man, and we are unknown to you. Be assured that we are not rascals, but travelers in distress. Our horses are weary, and my cousin Juan, here, has suffered an accident, for which his horse was to blame, but not the sharp rock upon which he fell. I would have water that I might cleanse the dirt from the wound, and food that we may continue on our way to Sandoval, if —'

'Sandoval is not upon this road,' said the hollow-cheeked one, drinking the liquor hastily, but retaining the tiny cup.

'Then, indeed, we are lost!' exclaimed Temescal, turning to Juan. And Temescal closed one eye. 'But one is never lost in good company,' he declared, again facing the sinister stare of the hollow-cheeked man, who seemed unmoved by either Temescal's appeal or his brandy. Yet Temescal noticed that the tiny veins on the other's bulbous nose had changed in hue from purple to red. The brandy was at work. 'A thousand-and-one pardons, señor,' cried Temescal. 'I had not noticed that your cup was empty. Again! As for breakfast, we require but little. Meanwhile, our horses can be fed. Would cinco pesos induce you to reconsider the matter?' And Temescal, much to Juan's surprise, slapped the fellow heartily upon the shoulder. 'Of

course, we shall breakfast, and pay for it. All the shops in the land will close when Pedro Importunio does not pay.'

'Cinco pesos?' The hollow-cheeked one curled his fingers.

'Seguro Miguel!' Which, although Temescal seldom resorted to slang, is pretty fair Spanish for 'Sure Mike.'

'Enrique!' shrilled a woman's voice from the adobe, 'must I tell you again that there are horses to be caught and saddled before Captain Temescal returns from Santuario?' And a short and exceedingly fat woman appeared suddenly in the doorway.

'I have strangers with me,' called the hollow-cheeked one. 'They ask for breakfast.'

'Must I spend my life cooking for all the thieves who steal horses and ride this way?'

'Without horses we should have been late for breakfast,' said Temescal, who had followed the man Enrique to the doorway. 'It is a pleasure to meet you, señorita. And even though we appear to you as thieves, believe that we would steal even less of your time if circumstances permitted.' Temescal bowed, and jingled some silver in his pocket. The woman's shrewish expression changed at once to one of oily suavity. 'Indeed, it will be an honor to prepare food for —'

'Pedro Importunio. Kindly do not ask me the name of my horse. I have not yet learned it. This is my cousin, Juan Sepulveda, a vaquero of Los Ojos.'

'Your handsome cousin is wounded?' queried the woman shrewdly.

'Injured, rather. A fall from a horse. Thus it is that

he does penance for my sins as well as his own. But you will absolve us, with breakfast, perhaps?'

The woman's crafty eyes flashed toward the single orb of her man. He passed his hand over his face as one who brushes away a cobweb. At the same time he squeezed his nose between his finger and his thumb. Temescal knew the sign — shutting off the breath — yet its significance did not seem to disturb his easy poise.

They entered the low, wide, and many-roomed house. The earthen floor was beaten smooth and hard by much use. The walls were brown with smoke. Despite the heat, the doors leading from the main room, apparently to numberless other rooms, were closed. The place smelled of stale grease and commingled odors of cooked food. A serviceable and ample stove, of American make, stood in a corner of the room, and upon it were pots and kettles of a size such as one might expect to find in a small hotel, rather than in an isolated ranch house occupied by but two persons. The woman bustled about the stove. The man Enrique seemed to hesitate as to whether he had best go and attend to the duty of catching the horses or stay.

'Must I remind you again that we have no milk?' queried the woman.

Enrique of the hollow cheeks departed grumblingly. Following his departure, Juan and Temescal were shown to a room back of the kitchen where they might wash and prepare themselves for the meal.

'I have used my eyes,' whispered Juan, as Temescal washed his face and rubbed his thick, black hair vigorously. Temescal gestured toward a big heap of bottles

in the back yard. Juan nodded. The bottles had once contained American whiskey, not a surprising fact in itself, but significant in that only officers of the several Mexican armies and as many bands of guerrillas were able to procure and afford such beverage.

'We are as fledglings in a rat's nest,' whispered Temescal. 'The rest I had promised ourselves may be longer than I had anticipated. There are men' — Temescal adjusted his silken scarf — 'in those rooms. Otherwise we should not have been left alone with the fat one. When you speak, be cautious. If you shoot, waste no cartridges.'

'Si, señor; my shoulder is still painful, yet I think it is not broken,' declared Juan.

There was ample reason for changing the subject. The morning sunlight through the front doorway cast on the floor of the other room the shadow of a listening woman.

'If I could have afforded it, I should have had a physician in Dolores examine the injury,' said Temescal. 'The poor have no business to get injured. Yet though we are poor we may still pay with both money and gratitude for that which the young woman is preparing for us. He seemed an old man to have so young a daughter. No doubt —'

'But, señor —' Juan caught himself, and cleared his throat.

'You speak wisely,' declared Temescal, 'especially when you leave so much to the imagination.'

Always realizing the absolute value of personality, Temescal took pains to enhance his naturally fine appearance by casting himself into a superlatively pleasant

mood, without the aid of other stimulant than necessity. In three strides he had entered the adjoining room, each stride sprightly yet dignified. His eyes shone with congeniality. His face radiated good-fellowship. Even his hands, as he gestured and shrugged his shoulders — politely — expressed deference and a high regard for the portly woman who was preparing his breakfast.

'I fear this is an imposition,' he said. 'Yet your father was undoubtedly sincere when he invited us in.'

Enrique's wife — known to the ladrones who periodically frequented the rendezvous as 'The Wildcat' — stared at Temescal unsmilingly. As she distrusted all men, including her husband, it was difficult for her to accept Temescal's compliment as to her age.

'I am no more the daughter of Enrique than this Juan Sepulveda is your cousin — and you know it!' she said, squaring her elbows and facing Temescal.

'A thousand-and-one pardons, señorita!' Temescal bowed gallantly. 'You are perhaps his niece, then?'

'You are bold, and an old hand with women,' declared Enrique's wife. 'But flattery does not fill an empty purse.'

'Or an empty heart, perhaps?' queried Temescal in his best manner.

The fat woman displayed a slight hesitancy, as though considering the matter. Temescal encouraged acquiescence in his suggestion by maintaining a dignified silence, as though the question were of the deepest import. For a second, or perhaps two seconds, the portly wife of the malignant Enrique seemed undecided. But she was a vixen, and so long accustomed to the speech

and ways of rough men, that not even Temescal's blandishments could soften her harshness.

'Your breakfast is ready,' she said, gesturing toward the end of the long table, which could have accommodated twenty hungry men.

'Lacking only your smile to make it a banquet,' declared Temescal, who seemed strangely immune to her rebuffs.

And with the manner of a Don of Andalusia, he seated himself and partook of the coarse fare with all the grace of an exquisite carving a pheasant. Juan, whose shoulder was exceedingly painful, ate sparingly. He was still using his eyes. There was milk upon the table, although the woman had said there was no milk. Juan wondered why Temescal had wasted so much courtesy upon so ill-mannered a woman. And any one not totally blind could see that the woman was as old as Enrique himself. Still, Temescal had referred to her as his daughter. Truly, Temescal was playing a childish part. Then, like a twinge of conscience, a sudden pain shot through Juan's shoulder, reminding him that Temescal had foreseen the recent occasion for it. So, recalling his vow of loyalty and obedience, Juan accepted the situation without further self-questioning, determined that, if they were as fledglings in a rat's nest, the rats would find them prepared. It worried Juan that their horses and carbines were not within reach, so, complaining that he felt dizzy, he rose and stepped out of the house. Following Temescal's general example, Juan did not hasten to see if their horses and arms were easily available, but sat on a bench under the portal, his head in his hands — the veriest image of dejection.

'Splendid!' exclaimed Temescal, noticing Juan's attitude.

The woman questioned his exclamation with shrewd eyes.

'The coffee!' said Temescal. 'May I trouble you for another cup?'

Enrique's wife poured another cup of coffee, which Temescal drank slowly, as though desirous of experiencing its full flavor.

Juan had risen and was walking slowly out toward the road. He had no need to feign distress. His shoulder pained him exceedingly. He strode back and forth like a man suffering from toothache. His stride became aimless — down the road a few paces, then back, then a few paces toward the house. Meanwhile, he used his eyes. The horses were in a small corral, still saddled. Juan could hear Temescal's voice and an occasional word. He paused and listened. Temescal was telling the woman the story of 'The Alcalde with Three Wives!' Juan knew the story — one that interested men, and was of triple interest to all women. Temescal's deep, mellow voice rolled on. Juan continued his pacing up and down, yet with a definite aim. Finally he was round the corner of the adobe, in the shade. Passing an open window he glanced within. Five or six ragged and villainous-looking men were asleep on the floor. Their arms — American rifles — were in a corner. Juan's experience in the army told him much. The men were obviously bandits, possibly followers of the other Temescal. Moreover, they slept the sleep of those overcome with drink. He passed the window swiftly. It would be well to get the horses and depart. Cautiously he entered

the corral, secured the horses, and was making his way back when a head was thrust from the window he had so recently passed. Bleared eyes stared at him from a heavy, drink-swollen face. Juan nodded a greeting and kept on. He heard a voice, and then another. He hastened round the corner and up to the doorway.

Temescal was proffering money to the fat woman, who was arguing shrewishly. 'But why should we wait for your husband, when the sun is already above us?' queried Temescal.

'Señor!' cried Juan. 'Make haste! There are men in that room!'

'Impossible!' exclaimed Temescal. 'The señorita assured me that we were alone. Twice she has refused the money I have offered for our entertainment. I would have her understand that we are not beggars.'

Temescal also had heard the sound of a voice and some one moving in one of the rooms, and for that reason he was on his feet and ready for a surprise. Yet he did not know, until Juan arrived at the doorway with the horses, where Juan had gone.

'Your money!' said Temescal brusquely, as he tossed the coins on the table.

Enrique's wife had earned the name of 'The Wildcat,' beyond all doubt. With a surprisingly swift gesture, for one so fat, she dipped her hand into the bowl of ground chile on the table and flung the pepper in Temescal's face. For an instant Juan did not realize what had happened. Then, as he heard Temescal cry out, he knew.

Dropping the reins of the horses, Juan leaped through the doorway and caught hold of his companion. 'This

way!' he cried, pulling Temescal round and urging him toward his horse. 'Here is the stirrup. Mount and ride! I shall follow.'

Thrust against the horse, Temescal, though blinded and suffering great agony from the pepper, caught stirrup and horn and swung up. 'I am of no use. I am blind!' he cried.

Juan struck the horse, which leapt away. The fat woman shrieked, calling upon some one to kill the strangers. And like a mad Amazon she rushed at Juan to grapple with him and hold him. 'An eye for an eye!' cried Juan as he struck. Enrique's wife suddenly sat down in the doorway.

Juan jumped back and swung to the saddle. As he spurred his horse, he turned. A rifle was thrust through a window. Juan's pistol barked. A figure slumped down beside the fat woman. Juan leaped to his horse and sped down the road like a flash of light.

A half-mile beyond the house he overtook Temescal, who was riding at a short lope. 'Turn!' he cried. 'You ride toward Santuario!'

Temescal, rubbing his streaming eyes with his handkerchief, reined up. 'Even though blind, I still have intuition. Somewhere near here is my money-belt. Ten paces east of the road, beneath a triangular piece of rock. Secure it.'

Juan hastened to obey, yet it took him some time to find the hiding-place of the money. Finally he rode back to Temescal.

'I see one coming from the hill, driving horses before him,' said Juan. 'Yet there is one among the thieves of the plains who will not ride again. Also I was forced to

punch the fat woman in the eye. Otherwise she would have detained me.'

'You did wisely,' said Temescal. 'Lead, and I shall follow the sound of your horse's hoofs.'

'You suffer!' cried Juan.

'You must be my eyes — for a time. I shall recover. Almost, I dodged the assault. Ride wide of the house, and then swing in toward the west. I would give my money-belt and all that it contains for a gallon of cold water.'

And despite their injuries and suffering they rode hard, bearing in an arc toward the south and then toward the west. They were not followed then, for the very good reason that the bandit Temescal's men had instructions to await him at the house on the plateau. Finally the far, blue range of the Cordovas rose like a tiny welt on the great plain, and toward the hills rode Juan, faint and weary, and Temescal, suffering great pain from his seared and swollen eyes. Soon their horses slowed to a walk, leg-weary and oppressed by the intense heat.

Toward evening they rode into an arroyo which narrowed as it reached the hills. The horses pricked their ears and struck into a trot.

'There is water near by,' said Temescal.

'Si, señor.'

'Your voice sounds strange.'

'You are a fool,' declared Juan in the sing-song voice of the demented. 'Had I your strength I should have strangled the fat sow with my naked hands, and thirst would then be unknown to us. My colonel is dead. Then how should he spend money?'

'Find water!' Temescal commanded brusquely.

Juan found it — rode his thirsty horse into it, and, without so much as a sigh, slipped from the saddle and sank into oblivion. Temescal, having regained a glint of his eyesight, dragged Juan from the pool, and half-seeing, half-feeling, poured a trickle of brandy down his throat. Temescal did not drink until he had bathed his eyes in the pool. Then he took a generous draught of the peach brandy, and set about washing and rebandaging Juan's wound.

This accomplished, he unsaddled the horses and hobbled them. As they hopped ludicrously up the barranca toward the hills, he shrugged his shoulders. The horses might stray, and neither he nor Juan was in the best condition for tracking them in the morning. Yet presently the sound of the hobbled hoofs ceased.

Temescal nodded. 'They have found grass — else they would have kept on. And here is water. They will not stray far.'

Toward midnight, when the air was cooler, and faint, occasional breezes from the hills drifted down the barranca, Juan wakened and sat up. He still felt weak and dizzy, but his mind had cleared. He could see nothing in the darkness.

'Compadre!' he called softly.

'I am here,' came Temescal's voice.

'You do not sleep?'

'No. My eyes are not inclined to sleep, this night, so I keep them company.'

'You suffer much?'

'Not greatly — now that I have hold of the pain and will not let it gain the upper hand. Moreover, I have

my handkerchief bound about my eyes. I have dipped it in the pool.'

'I know of no pool,' declared Juan.

'We are in the foothills of the Cordovas. You rode well, until the fever of your wound unseated both you and your reason.'

'And you, unable to see, took care of me, that I am here and safe.'

'It is nothing. I did what I could.'

'But, señor! What may I do to ease your suffering? It is not that you should be burdened with the care of one like me. What may I do?'

It is possible that Temescal chuckled, or perhaps it was the sound of wringing out his handkerchief and dipping it in the pool that Juan heard. Then, 'Sleep, my son. The good sleep will restore you, strengthen your sinews, heal your wound, clear the cobwebs from your brain. Is there not to-morrow? To-morrow you will climb the golden stairway of the dawn, and standing upon the rim of the world survey the fields of romance and adventure. You are young. Sleep while you may. Then it will be still, that I may think.'

'Of what will you think, señor?'

'I cannot say. Thought is born of itself. At present I am thinking of Temescalita.'

'Temescalita!'

'None other. Her little hands lie cool upon my eyes.'

CHAPTER VII

POSSIBLY because youth seems perversely inclined to ignore good advice, Juan did not even try to sleep, as Temescal had suggested, but lay staring up at the countless and incomprehensible stars, thinking of his recent experiences, and pondering upon the probable consequences of deserting from the army. His imagination — so to speak — was in the saddle and spurring blindly in a wide and erratic endeavor to escape — no greater enemy than himself. Had his pulse — still carried a trifle high by the momentum of his fever — been normal, he might have reasoned that he was far safer in the companionship of Temescal than serving under so unscrupulous a leader as his colonel had proved to be. Yet Juan again allowed himself to doubt Temescal's judgment, and the value of his personality as affecting those inclined toward argument. It was quite evident that Temescal was vain of his personal appearance, vain of his eloquence, his marksmanship, his courage, and his new boots. True, he was a fine figure of a man, talked entertainingly, shot accurately, feared nothing, and wore excellent leather — yet in spite of all this he managed to stir up trouble wherever he went. His very presence excited interest, invited controversy, caused women's eyes to turn admiringly — a dangerous man to be associated with. Why, even in Santuario, where Juan was known, it had been Temescal this and Temescal that, and Juan Sepulveda scarce noticed, or if noticed it was simply as the handle on the lamp, some-

thing useful, but having nothing whatever to do with its radiance.

Thus Juan cogitated, inspired by that human perversity which forever seeks to pick a flaw in perfection. A gentle snore disturbed his cogitations. The mist of stars that floated above him became less vague and fanciful. A twinge of pain pricked his shoulder. It was as though the finger of conscience had touched him. 'A trifling wound in the muscles of your shoulder,' an inner voice seemed to say. 'Had it not been for the foresight and courage of your companion — who snores — the wound might have been here!' Juan shivered as he fancied a finger placed directly between his eyes. A deeper snore shook the balmy air of the starlit and peaceful night. 'He sleeps!' soliloquized Juan, 'while I lie here sleepless! And he snores like he talks, with great assurance. I am thirsty. He spoke of a pool.'

Juan sat up and felt about. His saddle-blanket was beneath him, and his saddle placed for a pillow. Across his legs was a sarape — Temescal's sarape. Juan threw back the sarape and stood up. His tongue was dry and rough, his forehead hot. Temescal had taken off Juan's boots that he might rest more comfortably. Juan, not aware of this in his somewhat dazed condition, took a step toward what he thought might be the pool — a black shadow in hazy shadows of the rocks. He stepped — as one often does when arising at night in an outdoor camp — on a sharp stone.

'Ow!' exclaimed Juan. A click, like the turning of a key in a crisp lock, startled him. 'It is I, señor! Do not shoot!' he cried. Temescal's snoring had ceased abruptly.

'I thought so,' said Temescal. 'But I am glad you spoke. I was about to express a doubt.'

'But, señor, you slept!'

'Not a wink!'

'But, señor, some one snored.'

'Then it must have been your conscience which slept and snored while you listened. However, that is nothing unusual. What disturbed you?'

'I have a great thirst.'

'So? Then get back to your blanket, and remember that we are companions in distress — not master and servant. You should have called me. I shall get water for you.'

Juan was glad to creep back to his blanket. He still felt weak and dizzy. Temescal fetched water from the pool, traversing the rocky ground several times, as his small drinking-cup held but little, and Juan was exceedingly thirsty. Refreshed by the cool water, Juan felt better. As his physical irritation subsided, he grew penitent. Temescal retired to his place against the rock, where he sat smoking a cigarette to allay his hunger.

'I have not slept since you spoke of Temescalita,' declared Juan presently.

'That is bad, because the mind magnifies distress at night. Moreover, your tone implies that you would confide something to me. Frankly, my temper is somewhat short, owing to the condition of my eyes. However, I shall try to be just. If you won't sleep, go ahead and talk.'

'It is nothing, señor — and yet —'

'Spoken like a woman! Out with it, and tell me to my face that you are weary of this pilgrimage; that I,

Temescal, have disappointed your romantic young ideals; that our feasting has been of the catch-as-catch-can order, and our dancing has been to the tune of six-shooters and thundering hoofs. No loafing about war-tortured towns and strutting in uniform before the fear-stricken and fawning eyes of girls who would knife you if you didn't wear a uniform! No opportunity, in this, our peaceful and serene adventuring, for standing bravely shoulder to shoulder in a firing squad and shooting down poor, stupid peons lined against an adobe wall! No officer to slap your face and call you that which it would shame me to utter, because you had looked cross-eyed at some girl he fancied! No chance to dash out the brains of an abandoned infant with the butt of your rifle; to loot, maim, devastate, pillage, brutalize, murder; or to terrorize and put to shame the womanhood of your own country! Oh, I can understand how, sojourning with a man of peace and a gentleman — your stupidity is my excuse for mentioning it myself — and finding yourself in a position to recline at ease and think, you have been filled with self-pity for your humble estate as the companion of the friendless Temescal.'

'But, señor!'

'Quite so! Do not interrupt me. I can confess and absolve you much quicker and more effectively than by listening to that which I already know. I would instruct rather than reprimand. To be brief, jealousy is at the bottom of this nest of disorder which seems to have enmeshed your better self. Jealousy! If it is possible for you to be nakedly honest with yourself, and with me, answer me. Was it not in the town of Santuario that you first secretly rebelled against my judgment and

authority? Wait! And was it not because you imagined that the glances of many of the women were concerned with Temescal rather than with Juan Sepulveda? You have hitherto fed upon the admiration of women as you have taken your daily bread — as a matter of course. Missing a meal or two — so to speak — you wondered who had filched it. Jealousy inspired you to charge me with the offense. Do you think I would stoop to filch a cooky from the shallow platter of your egotism? Girls? Corn husks! Women? Shavings! And from these husks and shavings you have kindled a fire to scorch your own soul. I may seem intolerant. I am not. I am simply honest. What have you to say?'

'I am dazed,' declared Juan contritely. 'Yet now that you have finished speaking, I see that you are correct. I have been disloyal in thought. Forgive me!'

'For being yourself? Not I. Forgiveness between friends is of the heart, not of the lips. Moreover, I did but humor a passing fancy; I knew nothing of your callow cogitations. I but guessed at them. And, in becoming vehement, I somewhat eased the torment of my eyes, which feel like two ripe Bermuda onions. A pungent simile. But now that you have confessed —'

A gentle snore interrupted Temescal's harangue. Temescal smiled. 'Of a truth, I thought I could talk him to sleep if I kept at it long enough. The hatches of his mind battened themselves down in sheer self-defense. Poor young soldier! Who am I that I should chide his youth? Yet good will come of it. In declaring himself disloyal to me, if only in thought, he will become more loyal. Yesterday he exhibited exceeding loyalty. "One of those thieves of the plains will not ride again," he said,

their argument having been adjusted automatically, so to speak. And, "I was forced to punch the fat one in the eye," he said again, "else she would have detained me." Happily expressed, and with no thought of the risk he ran when he helped me, blinded and helpless, to my horse. Of a truth, Juan Sepulveda shall prosper and become a good citizen — of some country — even though he is but incidental to my present quest. The dawn is twitching at the curtain of night. Hunger is also twitching at the lid of my empty stomach. I could do much to a pot of frijoles — without chile.'

Squinting ludicrously, Temescal gazed toward the western sky. A bold, bright star still hung resplendent against the farthest wall of space. Temescal rose stiffly, and, reaching out his arms as though importuning some goddess of eld, addressed the heavens in a resonant, mellow voice. He forgot that Juan slept within a few feet of him, or that there was a Juan Sepulveda in the world.

'To you, bright star of Mexico, I will say that which I may not say to her. Somewhere within this desolated land, she sleeps in comfort and soft luxury. Each mile I journey is a song to her, a cadence of unrest and high desire. She, like the immortal Beatrice, bade me on this errand forth, and thus far I can't see that Señor Dante had anything on me. Yet I shall arrive, and lay my homage at her pretty feet' — Temescal paused and scratched his head — 'that is,' he added thoughtfully, 'if she hasn't changed her mind and decided to spend the summer at Palm Beach.' Temescal frowned, possibly at his own interruption. 'And when, once more in my beloved City of Mexico, we again sit beneath the

silken awning of the Cafe Simpatica, and I recount the hazards and the stress, the —'

Juan sat up suddenly. Temescal's voice, intensified by his feelings, had risen a full, though melodious octave.

'Are you in pain?' queried Juan solicitously.

Temescal frowned. 'I was but stretching myself awake.' He yawned. Midway in the act of flexing his arms, he stopped. A faint, silvery tinkling tickled the suave, still air of the arroyo.

'Sheep!' exclaimed Juan, rising.

'Breakfast!' declared Temescal.

CHAPTER VIII

THE pool, a luxury after traversing so arid a land, was patronized extensively by both Juan and Temescal. After bathing his eyes, Temescal kindled a tiny fire, and, heating water in his drinking-cup, shaved himself laboriously. Juan was puzzled that Temescal gazed continually into his broad, upturned sombrero as he shaved. Peering into the small, round mirror fastened in the crown of his hat, Temescal smiled at the reflection of Juan's curious face.

'You are feeling better,' declared Temescal, holding his head a bit sideways and scraping away with his razor, 'else you would not be so interested in my labors.'

'But, señor, your back is toward me. How can you know that I watch you?'

'This little informer told me,' said Temescal, tapping the mirror with the handle of his razor. 'I have been able to keep myself presentable, when far from the conveniences of a town, by having this little mirror always handy.' Temescal took up his hat and surveyed his partially shaven face critically. 'Yet, by "presentable" I do not mean simply clean-shaven.' His hand trembled as he replaced his hat on the ground. He smiled, and his hand grew steady as he resumed his task. 'You would not consider a man presentable with a bullet-hole in his head, would you?'

'I have seen many such, and they were not good to look upon,' said Juan, puzzled by the peculiar question.

'Quite so. Once, in Aguas Calientes, I had the mis-

fortune to differ with some gentlemen to whom I had taught the grand old American game of poker. I will admit that the lesson was expensive, to them. One of these gentlemen became displeased, as he said, with my personal appearance. It happened that we were standing out in front of a cantina, the displeased gentleman in front of me. There were others behind me. I replied courteously to the one who had accosted me, raising my hat as I invariably do when addressing an inferior, or a woman.'

'Yes! Yes! I see!' cried Juan.

'Indeed? And what do you see?'

'Why, those behind you were preparing to seize you and recover their money. You shot the man who had insulted you, made a rush for your horse —'

'Softly, amigo! You mean *you* would have shot the man in front of you. Think, while I shave my chin.' Temescal again picked up his sombrero and apparently studied his face. Then he laid his hat down and shaved his chin with a few broad strokes, glancing up at Juan, who had moved round in front of him, the better to hear his discourse. Juan shook his head.

'Then I am allowed to proceed?' queried Temescal, wiping his razor gently on the palm of his hand and rubbing the lather into the side of his boot. 'It was thus,' he said, as he dropped the razor into his sombrero. 'In this little glass I saw one behind me about to shoot me. I turned thus' — Temescal leaped to his feet, and, whirling like a cat that is thrown in the air, fired twice at a clump of brush on the edge of the arroyo. Then, before the startled Juan could catch his breath, Temescal jumped round again and kicked him in the stomach.

Juan doubled up like a hinge and shot backwards into the pool. It would seem that Temescal had suddenly gone crazy. Hardly had he kicked Juan in the stomach when he charged at the clump of brush on the arroyo's edge like a dog after a rat.

Gasping, bedraggled, and half-stunned, Juan climbed from the pool. He saw Temescal standing knee-deep in the brush, gazing at the ground.

'Señor!' called Juan.

Temescal did not seem to hear him, but stood gazing down pensively, his six-shooter hanging loose in his hand.

Juan experienced a quick chill that was not due to his immersion. He stepped gingerly among the rocks, coming to where Temescal stood.

On his face, in the brush, lay that which had, less than a minute past, been a living being — a potential murderer, as the cocked carbine bore eloquent testimony — yet a living being, as fond of life, perhaps, as was Temescal himself.

Recovered from his surprise, Juan seized one of the lifeless arms and turned the body over. 'Such are the followers of one called Temescal,' he said, pointing toward the hideously grinning face.

'What could you expect of this,' observed Temescal, gesturing toward the fallen man, 'save ambushment, treachery, brute hatred, and the lust to kill?'

'Dog!' exclaimed Juan.

'Not so! Rather, a poor waif of circumstance, the ragged emblem of poverty and disease; ignorant, faithless, kicked from one mischance to another, feeding from the common trough of his kind, and finally forced

to bear arms and serve a cause about which he knew and cared nothing save that it fed him — filled his belly with coarse food and clothed his back with a garment which a dog would sniff at and disdain to sleep on. Go back three hundred small years — the snap of a finger in eternity — and find from whence he came, and then dare censure *him* for what he was.'

'You mourn for a man so vile and treacherous, señor?'

'Not so. I do but ponder him and his kind. I think I have done a good deed in freeing him from the wheel. It was his time to go. I am but incidental to his going.'

'There were no others?'

'A bright question, my son, now that this one is where he is. No. He came alone, and he went alone.'

'I thought you had gone mad,' declared Juan, gazing at the still pensive Temescal. 'You were smiling, until you whirled about and fired so swiftly.'

'To defend myself — yes.'

'And now I know why you kicked me into the pool. Otherwise I might have made an excellent target for this one, or others, had they been with him.'

'Quite so! It was the quicker way. You are inclined to argue.'

'But, señor —'

'The handle by which you swing your arguments. But what?'

'Why did you charge at the very place where this man was concealed, knowing he was there. He might have killed you.'

'That is true — because my first shot missed him. Yet, where else could I run?'

'And the story of the men in Aguas Calientes — the men who would have shot you in the back?'

Temescal frowned, as though endeavoring to recall the details of the incident. 'Oh, as for that story,' he said finally, 'I did but humor a passing fancy — until I rasied my hat, and in the mirror saw the bright ring of a carbine muzzle in the brush here. Then the story became a reality, with a slightly different setting. So you may observe that nothing is impossible. No riddle that the human mind may conceive but that some mind may solve. Hence the riddle of immortality may yet be solved, without recourse to ancient superstition and ignorance. But I ask your pardon for talking sense. We will bury this poor peon —'

'But, señor, it moves!' declared Juan, starting back and seizing a rock with which to quiet all movement of the stricken man.

Temescal grasped Juan's arm. 'Let it move,' he said quietly. 'Did I not tell you that nothing is impossible?'

The man on the ground shuddered. His eyes came open. He groaned. Temescal knelt and examined the wounded one's head. 'Damn the luck!' murmured Temescal in excellent American, 'I only creased the buzzard!'

The companions again had recourse to the pool. Temescal bathed the scalp-wound of the thoroughly frightened and evidently penitent young ruffian, set him on his feet, and, leading him to the arroyo's edge, pointed toward the morning desert. Temescal said nothing. He simply gestured — with his six-shooter. The other zigzagged across the open, and disappeared among the rocks. Temescal turned to meet Juan's reproachful gaze.

'I have earned your reproach,' declared Temescal. 'I missed twice. However, he will never require a comb with which to part his hair. He enjoys a permanent division.'

'I am glad he is alive,' said Juan slowly, after considering the matter. 'Now you will speak words that I can understand.'

'Breakfast, for instance?'

CHAPTER IX

MEANWHILE, the desert sun, with brazen disregard for all such atoms as Temescal and Juan, for peons chopping wood or hoeing beans, or lawless horsemen journeying here and there across that spacious land, for horses, cattle, sheep, and stolid burros, drew up majestically from the far, misty rim of the world and swept the long morning shadows back toward the concrete shapes from which they had ventured.

There are those who would find it difficult to associate the silvery tinkling of a tiny bell with sheep. And these — not the sheep, but the others — will declare scathingly that sheep are not belled in Old Mexico. And, por Dios! they are correct. Were Temescal and Juan, then, at fault? Possibly Temescal and Juan knew that it is the custom for shepherds to bell the pack-burro, not altogether that he may be found easily — doubtless some of 'the others' have jumped at this conclusion — but that Señor Burro, in his nightly meanderings, may discourage by bell, if not by book and candle, his untimely assimilation by Señor Mountain Lion, Señor Black Panther, or Señor Lynx.

Far up the barranca there was shade, and toward it plodded Temescal and Juan, the latter with a carbine in the hollow of his arm, not anticipating hostility, but prepared for it. Presently the barranca grew narrow, the footing rough. Temescal climbed its southern bank, following the tracks of their horses. Juan delayed to kneel and drink from the shallow stream. Temescal kept on

across the almost level benchland which sloped gently toward the foothills. Arriving at a tree which cast welcome shade for one whose eyes suffered from the white glare of the sun, Temescal raised his hat and bowed.

'I greet you, my friend,' he said whimsically to the tree. 'You offer me rest without disturbing your household arrangements, and hospitality without effusiveness. I accept both, and may no woodsman's axe sever you from your gracious mother, the earth.'

And straightway Temescal sat down, pulled off his boots, which, though a perfect fit under normal conditions, pinched a little in the heat. With his broad back against the friendly tree, he leisurely surveyed the pleasant benchland of brown earth marked here and there by spots of shade similar to that which he enjoyed. A painter would have delighted in sketching him thus, Temescal's immobility that of one who contemplates a pleasant theme, yet does not slouch, but takes his ease with dignity. His shirt was open at the throat, disclosing the arch of his broad chest. His ungloved hands rested lightly on his thighs — brown hands both firm and supple — Temescal was rather vain of his hands. And above all — most naturally — his fine head, neither small nor large, well modeled in that happy balance which denotes both physical strength and intelligence; his face that of one who knows life, yet is not burdened with the knowledge — the features positive, yet not exaggerated. Even Temescal's swollen eyelids could not altogether conceal the benign tolerance with which he viewed all objects, either animate or inanimate — at the moment he was observing a brilliant-hued

lizard sunning itself on a smooth, gray boulder. And one would not have imagined that Temescal's eyes were a dark blue, although at times they seemed black, especially when he was in anger. A paragon, then? Indeed, no! There are a thousand men who *look* like him, yet there was, and is, only one Temescal. Beside him lay his broad, heavy sombrero, his shapely boots, and his gloves. A band of scarlet beneath the lizard's throat recalled poignantly the gown *she* had worn when he had last seen her gracing the Valladeres Gardens in the City of Mexico. The band of scarlet, the costume, or perhaps the name 'Mariquita,' breathed rather than spoken, must have suggested song. In any event, Temescal raised his chin, filled his great chest with a breath which stretched h s shirt tight across it. Then, effortlessly, and with that splendid control of the diaphragm which is most essential to sustained melody, he poured out upon the listening air the resonant and spirited measures of a fine old drinking-song. Viewing him, listening to him, one might say that he did not sing, but, rather, allowed the song to depart of itself, joyously, as a golden bird sweeps from a cañon rim, circles, drops fearlessly, rises with scarce the movement of a pinion, and floats across the morning blue, delicately poised, yet vigorous and elate.

'I am almost in voice again,' declared Temescal. 'Juan, I suppose, is gazing at his reflection in the stream. But what of that, when one may borrow from an endless succession of to-morrows?'

Temescal became pensive, noticeable in that he allowed his chin to rest on his chest. In fact, Temescal always became pensive when he thought of Mariquita.

He gazed at his hands curiously, almost as though they were strangers to him. A slight, shuffling sound awakened him to realities. He glanced up. A girl, leading two horses, was coming toward him among the distant trees. It was evident that she had not seen him, yet she glanced about as though looking for some one. Nearer she came, and Temescal observed that she was barefooted, walking with the upright grace of one to whom the word 'corset' was a conundrum, and 'shoes' a vague ideal. 'Lissome,' he called her, to himself. Nearer still, he saw that she was clothed in a single garment of rough blue material, sleeveless, and belted at the waist by a twist of faded scarlet cloth. Perhaps, because the girl was so intent upon looking everywhere, she did not look anywhere in particular, assuredly not in Temescal's direction. She was now within some twenty yards of him, near enough for him to observe that her skin was of a warm, golden-olive hue, and her young face good to look upon. The led horses suddenly decided they would go no farther. They stopped. The girl coaxed and tugged. As she tugged and swayed, Temescal thought of a blue flower teased by the wind. The horses, desert-bred and alert for the unexpected, had seen Temescal seated beneath the tree. Facing the horses, the girl tugged gently at the lead rope and again talked to them. Walking backward lithely, she coaxed and tugged, laughing when they stopped and pricked their ears, each ear like a discovering finger pointing toward that of which she seemed so utterly unaware.

Temescal rose. 'A most unexpected —'

The girl turned swiftly, her brown eyes startled, questioning.

'— pleasure,' continued Temescal, bowing. 'Do not fear me, pretty one.'

Her eyes, less startled now, still questioning, absorbed each detail of the stranger leisurely, from his stockinged feet to his uncovered head. Never in all her sixteen years had she seen such a magnificent person, and her gaze told him so. And Temescal — never in his variegated career had he felt so absolutely self-conscious, embarrassed, so woefully — as he confessed later — in need of an overcoat. It was as though she saw all that he had been, all that he was, and all that he hoped to be, in that brief few seconds as she stood, loosely holding the lead ropes of the horses; not conscious of herself, where she was, or of the white sunlight touching with an iridescent sheen her glossy black hair. Temescal cleared his throat resonantly.

The girl's expression changed to one of quiet wonder. 'It was you, then, who sang?' she questioned.

'None other.'

'Will you sing again? I heard you — and my father heard you. He is Alejandro the shepherd. We live up there,' and the girl gestured to the foothills. 'Are these your horses?'

'Thank you for finding them — yes. I — you will pardon me while I pull on my boots. Frankly, I was not expecting you. My companion, Juan, it was he for whom I waited.' Temescal sat down and drew on his boots, rose and stamped his feet into them. He put on his sombrero, threw his sarape across his shoulder, and again cleared his throat. 'May I ask how far it is to your home, señorita?'

'Yes,' said the girl with unsophisticated directness.

She seemed puzzled by Temescal's manner of questioning.

Temescal smiled. 'How far is it?'

'But a half-mile, no?'

'And you heard me sing?'

'Yes. Your horses came to our place — Portrero de Los Piños. My father fed them a little corn. When he heard you sing, he said they must be your horses. He is very wise.'

Temescal nodded. 'I am in voice again! It is a good half-mile to your hills. Pardon me, señorita, but I do not know your name.'

'I am Alejandro's daughter, La Luz.'

'The Light! But I might have known it! The light that drowns upon golden grapes in the sun! At last I behold one unspoiled, utterly primitive, and also beautiful! Child, you have —'

The dark eyes of La Luz flashed. 'I am not a child. I am a woman!'

'Indeed? That makes a difference.'

La Luz smiled — and Temescal's heart skipped a beat. 'I am a woman,' declared La Luz. 'Does not Alejandro call me his "Little Woman"? Is it not I who cook for him and mend his clothes and help him with the sheep and make him laugh when he would be sad?'

'This Alejandro is your husband, then?'

'But, no. He is my father.'

'Good! And I — I am' — Temescal bowed — 'merely Temescal.'

'Temescal!' exclaimed La Luz, her eyes growing big. She turned and ran toward the hills, disappearing among the farther trees like a flash of brown light.

Temescal's black eyebrows drew together. 'What the

devil —' he exclaimed, when Juan, climbing the bank of the arroyo, diverted Temescal's attention in another direction.

Sheepishly Juan approached. 'I delayed, señor, because I found, when I stooped to drink, the imprint of a bare foot in the sand along the stream. I followed the tracks far up the arroyo. I would have gone farther, was it not that I heard a noise, like the calling of a calf, coming from this direction. Not knowing the cause — and, indeed, we are in a strange country — I came back. I see you have found our horses.'

'The calling of a calf, you said? And the tracks of bare feet? If your eyes were not so clear, I would suspect a recurrence of your fever. Yes, I have secured our horses, as you see. I have not been listening to the "calling of a calf," as you say, nor have I been following the tracks of bare feet. I have been engaged in far more important pursuits. In fact, I have learned much in the past half-hour. Yes, I have secured our horses — and now you may return with them to our recent camp and saddle them, and fetch them up to the home of Alejandro the shepherd who lives in the hills a half-mile west of here. He is expecting us. You stare as though I were daft. I am not. I am simply definite. Perhaps this Alejandro the shepherd has a daughter. Quien sabe? It might be that she has a name. I should be willing to venture that her name is La Luz! Also that she is ravishing, in a wild and untutored way. I should even go so far as to assert that she is a peach. But I forget that you are unfamiliar with the American language. Fetch our saddles. I shall proceed toward the shepherd's home, where you will find me.'

'But, señor, how —'

'Precisely! Exactly as you have said! No doubt about it whatever! *I* have not been following the tracks of bare feet.' And Temescal gestured roundabout as though calling the earth to witness that he had been engaged in no such vapid endeavor.

The gesture was unfortunate in that it directed Juan's literal gaze to the earth, whereon, not two paces away, he saw the imprint, repeated, of the bare feet of La Luz.

'It is quite plain,' declared Juan. 'that you have not. It is also quite plain that you had no need to. The barefooted one came to you.'

'That is as it may be' — and Temescal again gestured airily. 'My breakfast has grown cold. How is yours?'

'Of a truth, I am empty, though I drank much.'

'Absolutely! Water does not run uphill.'

Leaving Juan to digest this original remark, Temescal swung round, and, blandly ignoring the covertly amused gaze of his companion, followed as best he could across brown earth and pebbles, rock and meadow grass, the tracks of bare feet. He seemed strangely elated. It was as though he trod upon sunbeams in his arcadian pilgrimage. The pinch of hunger was forgotten — for the moment. He admitted as much to himself when the pinch of hunger again recalled the fact that he had but recently forgotten it. He strode as one upon a sprightly mission of discovery. He hummed an aria, and flirted the end of his sarape across his shoulder. Coming upon a beaten path that evidently led from the stream below to the house of Alejandro the shepherd, he hesi-

tated. The footprints of La Luz the 'Golden One' — so he named her to himself — were no longer visible. The glamour of the quest faded as he realized that La Luz had not taken kindly to the name 'Temescal.' 'Had I said "Mephistopheles," she could not have fled more swiftly,' he reflected. 'Moreover, this Alejandro may be a tough customer, a wary old ram with a hard head. However, I am not exactly veal, myself.'

Temescal proceeded, with dignity, yet with caution, his eyes active beneath an untroubled brow. The path wound on and up among the trees. Abruptly he came upon a great circular meadow of close-cropped green — bright sunlight all about, and in the middle of the meadow a solitary piñon-tree. Across the meadow, sealed against the brown rock of the hill as though it were a part of the hill itself, was a long, low, flat-roofed adobe, near it a stake corral, and a high pole platform heaped with golden stalks of corn. A milk-white burro nosed about the dooryard. Above, a sky of turquoise, edged roundabout with the sharp spires of dusky pines.

'This is good!' murmured Temescal, sighing heartily. 'And yet — La Luz is better.'

Aware that he who comes singing, be it in broad daylight or in the impenetrable dark, disarms suspicion and allays chance fears, Temescal strode across the green meadow — following, as it were, the sonorous cadence of his song. And Temescal was almost a chorus in himself.

Ending the song with his arrival, he paused a few yards from the open doorway of the low brown house. Drawing a cigarette from his pocket, he lighted it and flicked the match away. He did not need to strike an attitude. In fact, the attitude preceded the inspiration.

The thing was done before the mind — a comparatively slow agent — had acquiesced. The milk-white burro stared profoundly at Temescal, then delivered himself of a series of chest tones that reëchoed roundly in the caverns of the hills.

'A little off key in the upper register,' observed Temescal, 'yet a worthy effort.'

'That is not the man,' said some one within the house.

And immediately an appalling figure blocked the doorway — the travesty of a man, scarce four feet in height; a twisted dwarf whose arms reached almost to the ground. The thin, bowed legs were clad in buckskin such as the southern vaqueros wore. A faded brown shirt hung loosely over the sunken chest. The man was hatless, his hair snow-white and as fine as spun silk, his face — and Temescal stared — was as startling as his figure in that it was like the face of a Spanish nobleman, the features finely wrought, æsthetic, delicate, and the eyes like those of an affectionate dog.

'I am Alejandro the shepherd,' he said in a gentle voice.

'I am Temescal — or, if unwelcome bearing such a name, I have another.'

'Not Temescal of Cabazon? No!' The shepherd shook his head. 'You are another.'

'No, not of Cabazon, although I know the place.'

'Not Temescal of Cabazon,' reiterated the shepherd positively. 'I told my daughter you were not that man.'

'Your pardon, Señor Alejandro. I am curious. What if I were the Temescal you mention?'

'Then you would not be welcome to my house. But I keep you in the sun. Enter.'

'My gratitude, señor! But, no. I have a companion who is coming with our horses which you so kindly fed. He was once a soldier. He is dear to me because he is young, faithful, and stubborn, not to mention the fact that he saved my life recently. He is a handsome fellow, and withal, modest. I lay no claim to the latter distinction, myself.' Temescal's eyes twinkled, though his manner was gravely sincere. 'In fact, I think well of myself, as doubtless you have observed. In other words, I am not a hypocrite. I lie, when occasion demands, and I flatter myself that I lie convincingly. I have exchanged horses, in extreme necessity, without tarrying to determine the fairness of the exchange. I have also exchanged shots, under pressure, with gentlemen who would have confessed that I was a trifle the more accurate, had they lived. Once I commandeered an automobile with which to cross the border. However, it was a very small car with a short name, and I quickly abandoned it, although I am considered a good rider. I have known many vicissitudes — and few women. I pay as I go. Yet that I may enter your home under no misapprehension —'

Alejandro the shepherd interrupted with a gesture toward his doorway. 'But why speak of all this? My door is open.'

'Oh,' said Temescal airily, 'merely that you may know what sort of man my companion Juan is associated with. If, after what I have said, you will accept him as a guest, I shall be glad to accept your hospitality.'

'You must be very thirsty,' declared Alejandro. 'Daughter!'

La Luz came to the doorway, a certain girlish defiance in her face as she saw Temescal, possibly because she was ashamed of having run away from him.

'Some wine for our guest' — and Alejandro smiled.

La Luz came, bearing in her brown hands a huge, carved wooden cup, brimming with the purple vintage of the Cordovas. It was a generous cup, an alluring cup, a mammoth cup — a beaker! The cool wine was edged with silvery bubbles that danced in the sun.

Temescal took the cup from La Luz and held it aloft. 'From such a flagon old Rabelais might have quaffed,' he exclaimed dramatically.

'But that is a Spanish cup — not French,' declared the shepherd.

'You know your Rabelais? And here, in this arcadian hermitage? Glorious! Señor Alejandro, I drink to your' — Temescal was about to say 'discernment' when he caught a glance from La Luz — 'daughter.' Which goes to show — nothing.

Temescal's throat was dry, and the emptiness of hunger nagged him. In one slow, fragrant, and soul-satisfying draught he emptied the cup, turned it and watched a few bright, purple drops trickle to the ground.

He gave the flagon to La Luz, who gazed upon him wonderingly.

'I am new-fashioned on the spot!' declared Temescal. 'Scarce a minute ago I was but the whimpering shadow of a man, a dry pod rattling in the wind, an empty purse, a husk, a brittle gourd; and now I am —' he hesitated for the right word.

'Not Rabelais?' suggested the shepherd.

Temescal coughed. 'Well, no! Simply, your guest. That would be my companion Juan, with the horses. No need to wait longer. That sip of wine has made me peculiarly hungry.'

Temescal stepped aside, indicating that La Luz should enter. Alejandro the shepherd stepped aside — and Temescal entered.

Alejandro followed Temescal's broad back through the doorway. 'He drinks as he talks, in a large way,' soliloquized the shepherd. 'If he eats as he drinks! Still, we have enough — though it is simple food.' And the misshapen little shepherd smiled benignly, because he had a guest, and such a guest! Alejandro loved all human beings in the world, save one.

CHAPTER X

WITHIN the long, low-roofed, and friendly house, Temescal paused, turned, and in a sweeping glance, in which was commingled appraisal and admiration, satisfied himself that this was no ordinary shepherd's hovel, but the home of a man who, though poor, appreciated cleanliness and order. The earthen floor, hard, smooth, and good to feel beneath one's feet, was clean-swept, as was the stone hearth of the deep and spacious fireplace. The walls were whitewashed and bare, save for a few essential decorations, such as the old Spanish clock which ticked, one might say, diffidently; a beautifully wrought silver crucifix, a hat and coat upon a peg near the doorway, and a shelf accommodating Alejandro's few choice books. The vegas, or roof-beams, were of unhewn native timber of the hills. The deeply recessed windows were high and small, affording sufficient light without glare; enhancing, by restful shadows in the corners of the room, the effect of intimacy and seclusion. The chairs were home-fashioned, and substantial, their seats of tanned cow-hide, and the backs of hide-thongs laced. The table was of hewn timber, the top neatly joined and polished by much cleaning. The doors were of split timber, hinged upon heavy wooden pins. About the fireplace were the cooking-pots and pans. La Luz, bending above a huge iron pot that simmered and gurgled alluringly, fetched from its fragrant depths pieces of steaming meat and broth so poignantly appetizing that Temescal, in spite of himself, cleared his throat as

one might delicately warn his guests at table that he was about to say grace. And there was bread, coarse, wholesome, and crisp-crusted; bread which would offer that resistance essential to a thorough enjoyment of its flavor and promote sound digestion. La Luz disappeared, returning swiftly with a bowl of goat's milk. Temescal bowed as he accepted the seat proffered by Alejandro, and, dropping his sarape across the chair-back, seated himself in a hearty and solid fashion, like one who never quarrels with his digestion, but attacks that which is placed before him as a good swordsman engages in a friendly bout, lustily, yet never extending himself to the utmost.

Scarce had Temescal seated himself than he rose. 'Your most excellent hospitality has put me at fault,' he declared, sniffing audibly as the aroma of the steaming stew rose to his nostrils. 'I must admit that I had forgotten that I had a companion, other than my hunger.'

'But he serves you?' said Alejandro.

'Only as I serve him, my friend. You have placed food for him. I shall wait.'

'But there is no need. You are a hungry man. Daughter, go and show the young man where he may put the horses.'

Temescal shook his head as La Luz vanished through the sunlit doorway. 'Now, indeed, I shall wait!' he murmured. He visualized the meeting of Juan Sepulveda and La Luz — the handsome young soldier and the unsophisticated and primitively beautiful daughter of the hunchback shepherd.

'Juan comes, leading the horses,' reflected Temescal.

'His face is touched with a shade of weariness, which always appeals to women — especially when the weariness is in a young face.' Temescal sat down again, but deliberately turned his chair away from the table. 'He sees La Luz, and he grins like an idiot. But she does not think so. To her he wears the smile of a young conqueror. La Luz offers to take the horses. They converse, chiefly with their eyes, confound it! They understand each other — oh, yes! immediately. So do two kittens. Not until they have become cats do they realize that there are other cats in the world, — it may be inferred that Temescal had in mind La Luz and Juan — 'and they have much to tell each other. Meanwhile the sun moves on, nations rise and fall, babes are born and old men die, flowers bloom and fade — and my breakfast grows cold.'

With a rather peevish gesture he drew and lighted a cigarette.

'You are distressed about something?' queried Alejandro, his gaze sympathetic. One became oblivious of the shepherd's deformity when looking at his face — or listening to his voice.

'Not at all!' declared Temescal. 'In fact, I was thinking of nothing more serious than two kittens in a basket.'

'Is your young companion a favorite with the ladies?'

Temescal shrugged his shoulders — politely — and spread his hands — to cover the slight start that Alejandro's pertinent question had occasioned. 'Oh, he does well enough, I suppose. Hardly through his own initiative, however. He is, as I said, modest. Yet one never can tell. I have known exceedingly modest young

women who suddenly — ahem — changed their tactics, as it were. Is it far to the corral where our horses are to be kept?'

'It would not be far for either of *us*,' said Alejandro, smiling quaintly. 'But for those children —' and Alejandro gestured toward the meadow.

Temescal rose slowly, sauntered to the fireplace, and flicked into it the ashes of his cigarette. He strolled to the doorway, leisurely, as one might who is exceedingly curious and wishes to hide the fact. Juan and La Luz, hand in hand, laughing and chattering like linnets in a fig-tree, sauntered across the meadow, each, with disengaged hand, leading one of the horses.

'Quite unnecessary!' observed Temescal.

'Yes,' said Alejandro; 'the horses would come of their own will, having been fed here.'

'One would think that it were night, or that he were blind,' Temescal gestured impatiently.

'Then, perhaps, I did well to send La Luz?'

'As for that,' said Temescal, shrugging his shoulders, 'you are her father.'

The little shepherd nodded thoughtfully. He rose, and, reaching out his long arm, touched Temescal's chest. 'I believe that you and your companion are honorable men,' he said gravely. 'My daughter has known but two men in her life — Pepito, who is now with the sheep, and myself. There have been occasional wayfarers like yourself, but none have tarried here. There is no road, nor other reason for their coming. Once, each year, I journey to Cordova. My daughter is a child, yet she is as a woman grown. When last in Cordova I purchased for her a knife, a little knife, yet keen. Sheathed,

she carries it in her garter above her knee. I have told her she is to use it for but one purpose. I need not say more — knowing that you are fond of your young companion — who saved your life.'

'I understand you quite well, my friend. And that we may not embarrass these two young persons I shall proceed to eat my breakfast.'

A wan smile touched Alejandro's sensitive mouth. 'Do the shadows of ancient poplars disturb the cooing of doves?'

Temescal, enjoying his first mouthful of breakfast, swallowed hastily. 'Was that a quotation, or an inference, Señor Alejandro?'

'I have but few books.'

'And evidently no almanac among them. However—'

La Luz and Juan entered abruptly. Temescal forgot what he had been about to say. The dark eyes of La Luz were sparkling with animation.

'See!' she exclaimed, catching hold of Juan's hand. 'I have found a brother! This is Juan, who has seen great cities and many wonderful things. He has been a vaquero, a soldado — and he, too, can sing. Also, he has been wounded' — and La Luz touched Juan's shoulder caressingly. 'He says he will teach me to ride Señor Temescal's big horse. And he has taught me the words of a new song about a lady of Seville and her lover, who was also a soldado. May we not have the guitarra, my father — and you shall hear the new song?'

'As you wish, little one. Yet the young man may be hungry.'

Temescal sat with his elbows on the table and the bowl of goat's milk between his hands, in the act of

drinking. He glared at Juan over the edge of the brown bowl.

'The guitar, or breakfast?' queried Temescal.

'I think I can sing better after I have eaten a little,' replied Juan.

'Possibly,' muttered Temescal into the empty bowl.

So Juan drew up to the board, La Luz fetched another bowl of milk, and Temescal, pushing back his chair, stretched his legs out before him and lighted a cigarette. Alejandro, in the doorway, stood looking out upon the green meadow. Temescal seemed absorbed in contemplating the opposite wall.

'Why do you stare at me so strangely?' queried Juan presently.

'Do I? Pardon me for my seeming abstraction. I was observing the antics of yonder fly on the window-ledge. He is spinning about as though demented. Hear him buzz? Perhaps he thinks that he is singing.'

'But, no — it will rain,' explained La Luz. 'Each day it rains, a little.'

'In the hills, yes,' observed Temescal. 'And least, where it is needed most.' He gestured in the direction of the desert from whence he had come.

'The desert is a bitter land,' declared the shepherd, turning in the doorway.

'As for me — I love it!' Temescal spoke heartily. 'The desert sifts the false from the true, the weak from the strong. Out there, only he who is of iron may trespass and survive. And he who survives may never return to the desert, yet he will never forget. Thenceforth he will reverence water, and green grass, and spreading

trees, such as you have here. Yet I have known such magic in the desert's changing hue, such mystery in its silence, such majesty in its solitude, that I have wished — foolishly, perhaps — that I might enjoy the solace of my last sleep there with the ancient and unremembering years, until — well, until something happened. Something always does, doesn't it?' And Temescal shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands, politely.

La Luz, who had been dutifully cleaning the pots on the hearth, was gazing at Temescal, her head turned sideways. She understood but little of his somewhat sentimental dissertation — goat's milk and wine, mixed, have inspired strange utterances — yet intuitively she realized the theme to be big in attempt if not in its actual utterance. Temescal was not unaware that La Luz was gazing at him, nor that Juan, surfeited with food, was dozing in his chair.

It must be admitted that Temescal's swift descent to the practical was effective. He rose, thanked La Luz and her father for the repast, and, taking up his sarape and his sombrero, awakened Juan with a word. 'If you will excuse us,' he said, 'we shall step outside, where I may wash and bandage my companion's shoulder. I would not offend your eyes with an unhealed wound.'

But Alejandro would not hear of their going outside. So La Luz fetched water, the shepherd fetched a piece of coarse, clean cloth from a curiously fashioned rawhide trunk, and La Luz held the basin while Temescal examined and cleansed the wounded shoulder.

'And now you will enjoy the siesta?' suggested Alejandro.

'But your eyes, señor! Surely they need attention?'

And Juan related, briefly, the mischance which his companion had suffered.

'It is nothing,' declared Temescal. 'There are different qualities of light' — he allowed himself to glance at La Luz — 'and I find the light of your home beneficent, Señor Alejandro.'

'But, yes, it is something!' declared Alejandro. 'Shall I get you some tallow to rub on your eyelids? I saw that they were inflamed, as I thought from sojourning in the desert sun. Here is my bed —'

'But, no,' interrupted Temescal. 'Allow Juan to sleep here. As for me, I shall spread my sarape on yonder sheepskins. I have slept well on a harder bed. However, if strangers should approach, especially horsemen, I shall consider it a kindness if you awaken me before they reach your portal.'

'None shall disturb you,' Alejandro assured him. 'La Luz will soon be on her way to help Pepito bring in the sheep. But I shall be here in the doorway, with a book.'

Straightway Temescal stretched out on the sheepskins, his head on his arm. Juan had scarce lain down when he was asleep. Temescal, however, did not adjust himself to slumber so readily.

La Luz, taking up a long staff from a corner near the fireplace, passed through the room swiftly, silently, turning her head to glance at the slumbering figure of Juan. Alejandro, in his chair near the doorway, a book on his knee, gazed out across the green meadow. Finally Temescal arrived at a conclusion. 'Now, I shall sleep,' he said to himself. And Temescal slept.

The faint, silvery tinkling of a bell roused him. Ale-

jandro still sat in the doorway. The bed which Juan had occupied was empty. An angle of light from the western window told him that it was about five o'clock. Temescal enjoyed a yawn, flexed his arms, and shook his head to rid himself of the last few lingering shreds of slumber.

'You slept well?' queried Alejandro, turning his head.

'Excellently! I am a new man. Where is that rascal Juan?'

'But an hour since he left, saying that he would help Pepito and my daughter bring in the sheep.'

'Hum! A most worthy ambition. How many sheep have you, señor?'

'I would have fifty, with the lambs — and perhaps twelve goats.'

'Do you lose many — from lynx or cougar?'

'Once in a while a lamb is taken. Three I have lost since spring. And none since Pepito shot the cougar.'

'Your Pepito is armed, then?'

'Yes. I purchased a gun for him, in Cordova. I paid ten pounds of clean-washed wool for it.'

Temescal hummed a tune, striding up and down the long room, his head bowed, his hands clasped behind his back. Again he heard the tinkling of a bell. He paused and glanced through the doorway. Across the green meadow came Juan leading the white burro, and astride the white burro was La Luz, sitting very straight, her shapely little head carried high and her hands out before her as though grasping the reins. Beyond rose the dark bulk of the pines, their tops touched with the golden fire of the descending sun.

'I see no sheep,' declared Temescal.

Alejandro rose and drew his chair back from the doorway.

'They are in the big corral, beyond the meadow.' Kneeling before the fireplace he blew the embers aflame.

Temescal found the picture of Juan and La Luz interesting. He approved of the coloring, the setting, the figures in the middle foreground — a pastoral, the Shepherdess and the Soldier.

'But may I not even laugh?' The words came clearly across the evening silence.

'Not while I am teaching you horsemanship!' said Juan. 'If any one should laugh, it is I. See how you are gripping the beast's belly with your legs! You should carry your knees thus, forward, as I told you, and your heels down. That is better!'

'But not so comfortable,' declared La Luz.

'That has nothing whatever to do with it!' Juan's tone was brusque. 'You asked me to teach you —'

'But the white one is not a horse, anyway!' cried La Luz, and she leapt from the burro's back and ran toward the house. Her olive cheeks were flushed, her eyes glowing. She greeted Temescal diffidently. Then, like a flash, she was at the hearth, helping her father prepare supper.

Juan, ordinarily equal to the occasion, seemed stupefied by the abrupt disappearance of his tractable pupil. He gazed about, scratched his head, then, shrugging his shoulders, came marching toward the house, the white burro ambling along at his heels.

Temescal saluted his young companion cordially. 'You found the sheep enjoying good health? That is

well. Yet you seem perturbed. Does your head ache?'

'You wish me to say yes or no, that you may make a joke of it?'

'I can, in either case. Yet' — seriously — 'does your shoulder trouble you?'

Juan shook his head.

Then, lightly, 'Your heart, perhaps?'

'You are never serious, save to suit your own convenience,' declared Juan. 'Chance offering, I have something to tell you.'

'As for that . . .' Temescal stepped down from the doorway and drew close to Juan.

'This Pepito — I have seen his face before,' whispered Juan.

'Indeed? And naturally you don't like it as well as does La Luz, perhaps?'

'Not that. He is a homely and a sullen fellow. I questioned him, but he would not talk.'

'So? About what did you question him?'

'About a red barranca, whose northern bank is covered with brush. I am not certain — yet —'

'Nor I,' declared Temescal. 'Say no more about this. I also have cast a hook into the stream.'

And straightway Temescal became pensive, or seemed to have become pensive, while Juan, to the contrary, shook off his depression like a dog coming up out of a river. He chatted with La Luz as she darted here and there, fetching bread and cheese, arranging the plates and bowls, patting out tortillas — while Alejandro squatted by the fire, occasionally thrusting a stick of wood under the iron pot, in which simmered goat's meat

and vegetables, seasoned with chile and a clove of garlic. Juan fetched in wood. Juan fetched water from the spring below the hillside. He even volunteered to milk the goat tethered near the house, but La Luz would not let him.

Meanwhile, Temescal took his ease in the doorway, smoking and enjoying the cool air, the long sunset shadow of the hill athwart the meadow, the pine-tops touched with fading gold that drew slowly down behind the darkening hills. Yet the very inner Temescal, the soul of the man, was busy, as usual, contemplating imaginative sequences.

'Juan has grown suddenly and suspiciously domestic,' he reflected. 'It would seem that he would like to beat his sword into a ploughshare — and the not-as-yet-visible Pepito into a pulp. Or so I gathered from his expression. How quickly he drew from under his burden of apprehension when he found my shoulder ready to receive it! Yet who am I to sit in judgment on any man — save myself? They made a pleasing picture — she on the milk-white burro and Juan stalking along with military importance — until she hinted, by a very nimble process, that he was taking himself too seriously. There is something more to that young woman than good looks! How foolish of any one, including myself, to imagine that the untutored necessarily lack intelligence. Convention has not cast a film about the mind of La Luz; nor have high heels and stays destroyed the natural poise and balance of her wonderful body. Sophistication has not dulled her interest, even in the smallest task, which she attacks as though it were a novelty, yet with the deftness of habit. Nor is she self-

conscious. Truly the sophisticated are the most self-conscious folk in the world, aware of themselves to the extent of adopting artificialities to conceal their thinness of skin. Hence I, Temescal, though enured to hazard and the angling thrusts of chance, adopt a superlative insouciance that I may not weep at my own lack of moral courage. Doubtless, at the moment, I appear indifferent to what is going on about me, yet am I anything but that. Else would I rise and say to Alejandro, "What manner of man is this Pepito, who tends your sheep? Is he an honest man?" Truly that were the direct and honorable way. Yet I will not say it. Why? Because I fear the question might offend my host? He is too wise to take offense without first ascertaining the reason that inspired the question. Because I fear to disclose the reason? No. Because a healthy reason, unlike its sickly cousin "excuse," needs no protection from the sun. Because I fear Pepito the not-as-yet-visible? Hardly that! Rather, it is because I dislike to appear rude and ungrateful for hospitality. A conventional preference throttling a principle! Ridiculous! Surmising what I surmise, would the golden La Luz hesitate to speak? Not she! So, convention has made me a coward; sophistication has made me a panderer to convention, and both have made me a hypocrite, self-conscious, and afraid to appear that which I am. So I sit here and allow these heavy thoughts to come home to roost, like a flock of importunate and suspicious crows, half-afraid to alight in their habitual roosting-place, while Juan, sprightly idiot, enjoys himself!'

Temescal rose and betook himself to the washing-stone below the spring. Kneeling, he dashed the cold

mountain water in his face, scrubbed his head, and rising swung his arms vigorously. He presented himself at the supper-table, his face glowing, his eyes bright with good-humor.

CHAPTER XI

LIEUTENANT JUAN SEPULVEDA assumed command in the matter of discourse, his efforts to entertain being directed chiefly toward La Luz. Yet when Temescal's sonorous 'And so it was!' or, 'You speak the round truth, amigo!' answered Juan's appeal for confirmation of some strange and thrilling incident, the girl's dark eyes flashed from his story to the animated countenance of him who had sung 'The Ballad of Marching Men.' Alejandro, who itched to converse with Temescal upon topics of more weight and substance, ate sparingly and talked not at all.

When La Luz had finally cleared away the supper dishes and placed a lighted candle on the table, Alejandro emerged from his reflections. 'It is long since I enjoyed the companionship of an intelligent mind,' he declared, his gaze upon Temescal.

Juan fumbled for a fitting acknowledgment of the compliment, but Temescal shot the ball over the net.

'It is long since I have enjoyed returning such a compliment,' said Temescal. 'Returned, because I hesitate to keep that which so obviously belongs to you.'

'Let us share it, then,' said Alejandro dryly.

'Even so, I should still be in debt to your generosity, Señor Alejandro. Nor do I refer to the excellent supper which has put my hunger to sleep, yet has awakened my curiosity.'

'About what, señor?'

'Your boy Pepito. I hope our presence has not kept him from the table.'

La Luz glanced up from her task of scrubbing the pots and dishes. 'Pepito would not come in. He said he fell and cut his head on a rock, this morning. He would not let me see the cut. He said he was not hungry.'

'I did not know of the accident. Call him in, my daughter.'

'He will not come,' declared La Luz. 'He has gone to bed.'

'Pepito is strange and sullen, at times,' explained Alejandro. 'Yet he is faithful. I have had him with me since he was ten years of age. His father and his mother were killed by bandidos. No doubt you recall the raid on Sandoval, eight years ago, señor. I have good reason to remember it. La Luz also had a mother until that time.'

Temescal nodded thoughtfully.

La Luz rose from before the hearth and shook back her hair. 'Yes. And Pepito said he lost the carbine you bought for him in Sandoval.'

'Lost it!' Alejandro frowned and puckered his lips. 'Tut! Tut! And I paid ten pounds of clean-washed wool for the gun.'

Temescal shrugged his shoulders. 'Do not let that annoy you, my friend. I shall consider it a favor if you will allow me to replace the lost weapon.'

'But, you must not rob yourself, señor!'

'Nor shall I. I have many guns at my command.'

Juan, who had been staring at the candlelight, turned his head swiftly. So Don Ricardo Temescal had many guns at his command! Yet, meeting Temescal's impassive gaze, Juan read no deeper than his own quick surmise.

Old Alejandro watched them. 'Eight years ago,' he muttered. 'He bears the same name, yet this is not the man.... Alike in stature... the other was a beast. This one has a soul.'

Temescal lighted a cigarrillo and puffed out a great cloud of smoke. He brushed the smoke aside with a leisurely gesture. 'Juan dreams at the candle,' he remarked, smiling.

Alejandro's lips twitched. His huge hands gripped together.

La Luz, standing by his chair, stooped and kissed his sunken cheek. 'May we not have the guitarra, father?'

'I had forgotten. Here is the key.'

Unlocking the long wooden chest near the fireplace, La Luz fetched the guitar, which she would have offered to Temescal, but he shook his head.

'My companion knows a song that will please you. Being a soldier, he sings of love. I, being a lover, perversely sing of war.'

La Luz questioned Temescal's seriousness with her fine dark eyes — his own serene, unreadable. She flushed prettily.

'But I shall sing for you,' volunteered Juan. 'If I may have the guitarra —'

Alejandro smiled at Temescal. 'You are fond of music, señor?'

'So much so that I fear it. But to your song, young soldier!'

Juan twanged the strings, tinkled experimentally, turned the pegs. La Luz fetched a jarro of wine and two cups. Returning to the fireplace, she took the huge carved flagon from its shelf and set it before Temescal.

Temescal sighed heartily. In spite of his refusal to sing, La Luz filled Temescal's flagon first. 'And now,' mused Temescal, 'I know that she is a woman.'

Leaning back in his chair, Juan crossed his legs and tilted his chin. He struck a chord. He sang of 'The Lady of Seville,' serenaded her, wooed her, and sent her soldado lover to war in six or seven fervidly sentimental stanzas. Environment lent a peculiar charm to both song and singer. Yet all through the song the bright eyes of La Luz were turned toward Temescal. Unconsciously her face reflected his expression. Unaware that Juan, jealous for her applause, was watching her, La Luz echoed Temescal's 'Otra! Encore!' and asked Juan to sing another song.

'Or perhaps you will play "The Dance of the Haymakers,"' suggested Alejandro, turning to Temescal. 'I knew it well when I was a boy. Times have changed. Then, young men would work hard in the fields all day, and in the evening, with naught else but the guitarra and love of music to inspire them, would dance the moon behind the hill.'

'If I but knew the tune,' said Juan.

'Why, even our Pepito knows it!' cried La Luz. 'If I but whistle the tune, he will throw his hat on the ground and dance until he is out of breath. Even when he is sullen, I can make him laugh and dance like one gone mad.'

'Your Pepito is fond of music?' queried Temescal.

'Else I should not have to lock the guitarra in the chest,' replied Alejandro. 'Once he stole it from the house. I found him in the forest sitting before the guitarra, which he had propped against a tree. Poor

brainless one — he was talking to the guitarra, asking it to make music for him. The sheep had strayed. Pepito has strange moods.'

'The Saints guard him — and ourselves,' said Temescal. He drained the flagon, and sat studying the quaint carving on its rim.

Juan, who felt that his song had not been a thorough success, got up and strolled to the doorway. Alejandro engaged Temescal in a discussion of the times and the manners.

Juan, beckoning La Luz to him, informed her that there was a moon in the sky. 'There it is!' he said, pointing across the evening meadow. 'There, above the trees.'

'I cannot see through your head,' laughed La Luz.

So Juan politely stepped out, and, as it had been ordained from the first, they presently found themselves strolling across the green meadow, entranced by the fragrant stillness, the companionable stars, and the illusion that the magic of the night was but for themselves alone. A few slow steps together, and Juan told La Luz that she was more beautiful than all the stars.

A few slow steps together, and La Luz asked Juan how he could tell that she was beautiful when it was dark.

'But I have seen you in the sunlight, mi amor!' murmured Juan, who, being a soldier, and aforetime flattered by women, felt quite secure in thus addressing this unsophisticated young creature.

A few steps taken even more slowly; then: 'But why do you make your voice sound as though you were sad?' asked La Luz. 'I am very happy.' And La Luz

danced away in the dark. Laughing as she returned to him.

La Luz touched Juan's sleeve. 'Will you do something for me, my brother?'

Juan winced, yet declared grandly that he would do anything she wished.

'You speak of your friend only as Temescal. Has he no other name?'

'Oh, as for that, perhaps he has.

'What is it?'

'Well, if you must know, it is Don Ricardo Temescal.'

'Don Ricardo Temescal!' whispered La Luz. 'It is a name that I like.'

'It sounds well enough,' said Juan.

'Will you do something for me?' queried La Luz.

'Anything in the world, mi corazon!'

'Ask Don Ricardo to sing "The Ballad of Marching Men," again.'

'But, no!' said Juan, squaring his shoulders. 'If you want him to sing, ask him yourself.'

'Then you have lied to me, Señor Juan.'

'Lied to you! But, no! You do not understand. If I did not love you, and would protect you, La Luz —'

'What is love, Señor Juan soldado, vaquero Sepulveda?'

'If you will act like a child I do not care to talk to you, señorita.'

'Then don't. My father says that men say a lot of things to women, and do not mean what they say. *You* said you would do anything in the world for me, and the first thing I ask you to do, you refuse.'

'But you ask a silly thing. Why do you care to hear him sing again?'

'Because, when *he* sings, my heart goes with his song, up and up, into the sky . . . I do not know.'

'But I know, La Luz. Your heart longs for a lover. Kiss me, La Luz.'

Laughing, La Luz thrust her hand against his chest. 'If you will ask him to sing, I will kiss you.'

Yet, as it had been ordained from the first, Juan was to suffer disappointment. Almost he had kissed La Luz when the rich chord of a familiar melody rolled out from the doorway of the shepherd's home. A ripple of silvery notes — and across the starlit meadow floated the sensuous cadence of 'The Lady of Seville.' La Luz fluttered away into the deeper darkness beyond Juan's gaze, like a swift moth winging toward a flame.

While Juan and La Luz had been strolling across the meadow, Temescal and Alejandro held animated discourse anent the conditions of the country, a subject with which Temescal seemed exceedingly familiar. The little shepherd was grieved to learn that the land of his youth had changed so much; that the poor were being taught discontent as the first step toward a revolutionary movement which threatened to destroy the power — necessarily stern — which had so long held them together as one people. Temescal spoke of the devastation of the ranchito near Santuario, and the finding of the abandoned infant Temescalita.

'Not war — but savagery!' he declared. 'Unscrupulous intelligence has always oppressed the poor of every land. But when peon takes up arms against peon, let every man guard his head!'

'Would that the Great Physician might appear again!' said Alejandro devoutly.

'Machine-guns and light artillery,' murmured Temescal.

'But the Church, our President, the rurales!' cried Alejandro.

'Politics, oil-wells, anarchy,' murmured Temescal.

'But I had not thought it could be so,' mourned Alejandro.

Temescal emptied his flagon. 'Yet it must be,' declared Temescal. 'Señor Alejandro, consider your life here in this pleasant isolation, as a true picture of the Mexico that is passing. Consider, if you will, my present circumstances, my inflamed eyelids, my natural unrest and dissatisfaction with conditions all about, as illustrating the Mexico that is endeavoring to be. I am outlaw for no reason other than my own sincerity of purpose. One may not stand still and prosper, so I journey, yet I do not know when or where I shall arrive. My chance companion is a young soldier who cares not whether he serves song to his cousin-friend or bullets to his cousin-enemy, so long as he is occupied. Once a vaquero, and, no doubt, a good one, he took up the trade of war because war took his trade from him. The treachery of his own commander forced him to desert the army and look out for himself. He is loyal to me, believing me a just man. I can be no less loyal to him, believing him sorely in need of an ideal. Yet I doubt that I can hold him to one purpose long. In illustrating conditions you will pardon me if I assume that I represent the brains of Mexico, and my companion, its rifles. So my companion and I serve one another, not paupers,

yet vagabonds of chance, seeking a perfection which may never be realized. Meanwhile we are obliged to forgo such small safety and content as offers, until the highways are again safe for every man.'

'But what can you do to make them safe, señor?'

Temescal gestured. 'Individually, nothing.' Then, with great sincerity: 'View our highways with the eyes of strangers and sojourners from other lands. Of a truth, it would seem that I am a stranger in my own adopted country.'

'Adopted?'

Temescal nodded. 'And by it adopted into a service of which I may not speak, else I should betray a trust. I was chosen for my mission because I am of the land and yet not of it. That which the native-born accepts with a shrug, I accept with the same shrug, but not with the same eyes.

'I was born in Morelia, Señor Alejandro. My father was of some wealth. He owned many cattle. It was told among our vaqueros that I had scarce outgrown my cradle when he had me in front of him upon a horse. Of a truth, I cannot remember when I did not ride, nor can I remember when a reata felt strange to my hand. My mother was of an old Spanish family, living in Guadalajara. She knew many folk-songs of both Spain and Mexico. When I was no taller than this table here, my mother taught me to sing. She would sit in the doorway in the evening, and I would stand upon the step below. When she sang, I watched her lips and kept the tune with her. While it was always a joy to look up into my mother's face, still, I think she employed a deliberately wise method in instructing me. Without realizing it, I

held up my head and kept my shoulders back. She taught me to sing with my voice, and to forget that I had a body. Also it was my mother who insisted that I should travel when I became older. My father would have made a cattleman of me. I attended an American college long enough to observe that social democracy is a big billboard for a poor show. In Europe I found the people much more democratic. Enlisting in the Polish army, when very young —'

'I had it that you were a soldier!' said Alejandro.

'But, no. I am a man of peace. Sacaton! But the good wine floats a caravel of memories!'

Alejandro, who had not neglected the wine, poured the last of that in the jarro into Temescal's flagon. 'Aye!' said the shepherd. 'Your good mother taught you to keep your shoulders back. Yet not even the Virgin of Guadalupe, at whose feet I was found wrapped in an old manton, could teach me to keep my head up and my shoulders back. I was misshapen from birth, señor; abandoned! Yet I now have a great pity for the woman who bore me.'

'We grow old over our wine! And that should not be! cried Temescal heartily. 'I drink to the father of La Luz.' And Temescal emptied the flagon as though it had been a mere wineglass.

'A thousand thanks, señor. The wine, at least, is impartial.'

'As to the instrument it plays upon? Quite so. Wine may lend a peon the dignity of a king, and cause a king to perform like an ape. Yet I admire a man who, when drunk, will confess it. The difficulty is to know when one is drunk.'

'Then I shall fetch more wine,' declared Alejandro. 'It is long since I have enjoyed the companionship of an intelligent man.'

'Or I, such unearned appreciation. May I carry the candle for you, Señor Alejandro?'

'I do not seek my grave!' Alejandro spoke sharply. 'I seek a resurrection.'

Temescal nodded to himself as Alejandro tottered out after more wine. The shepherd's shadow, as it moved along the wall, was as that of a deformed giant. Temescal lighted a cigarrillo. 'The wine has stretched our shepherd's skin to the thinness of tissue-paper,' he mused. 'Another inch of candle melted, and he will be either maudlin or inspired. Softly, Temescal! You have vouched for your young companion with the handsome face — and the girl wears a little knife in a thong above her knee.'

Temescal took the guitar from the table, sounding each murmuring string to determine if it were in tune. Frowning, he gazed at the darkness beyond the open doorway, wishing that Juan and La Luz would return.

Alejandro shuffled in, swung the jarro of wine to the table, and sat down, breathing heavily. Thrusting his long arm out, he touched Temescal's broad chest. 'Sing!' he whispered. 'I would behold a miracle.'

'Then watch the doorway.' Temescal smiled.

And immediately he struck a chord, a martial, commanding chord which thrilled the shepherd to his very bones. A ripple of silvery notes — and Temescal swung into the light, sensuous melody which Juan had so recently attempted. Yet Temescal's modulations and reserve were so excellent, his tone so rich and colorful,

his comprehension of the song's values and limitations so unaffectedly just, that Alejandro could hardly believe it to be the same song.

La Luz, who had left Juan staring after her in the darkness, appeared in the doorway, poised like a sail upon a reaching wave. In her hesitant eagerness she seemed the very spirit of the song itself. Yet the light of expectancy died from her eyes as Temescal concluded the song and laid the guitar aside. Pensively she regarded the dim room, the dull embers in the black mouth of the fireplace, the steady candle flame with its aura of faint gold. Her father's gaze was somber — fixed upon the wine in his cup.

'But see what I have found!' cried La Luz, gesturing toward the doorstep.

Alejandro started up like one awakened from sleep. 'What have you found, my daughter?'

'Pepito!' laughed La Luz. She ran to her father and, taking his hand, urged him to the doorway. In the shadows, near the step, crouched the lad Pepito, motionless, like a huge toad. He blinked in the soft radiance of the doorway light, his mouth open, his eyes like beads of polished jet.

'Why did you not come to supper?' asked Alejandro.

'I fell on my head. I was afraid to come.'

'The Saints lend me patience! Afraid of what?'

'I lost the gun, señor. I was afraid that you would beat me.'

'Have I ever lifted my hand to you? Come in where there is light. I would see to your injury.'

Cringing in the shadows, the sheep-tender put both hands on his head, his attitude like that of an ape, his

eyes, ape-like, blinking, restless, in avoiding Alejandro's gaze. The old shepherd took hold of his arm, drew him into the room. Pepito stared at Temescal, who nodded in affable indifference and turned to ask La Luz what had become of Juan.

'Oh, I left him talking to the stars,' said La Luz.

'They are patient. Your muchacho hit his head on a rock?'

'Si, Don Ricardo.'

Recognizing the youth as the bushwhacker who had tried to kill him that morning, Temescal felt inclined to ask a question or two. Yet he hesitated to embarrass his host, satisfied that his Pepito's attempt had been inspired by a desire to protect his patron and the home. Warmed by much good wine, Temescal forbore to reason in fractions, but, rather, summed up the situation in a broad and generous reflection. 'We came. We have thus far lived a pastoral. Let us leave behind us as pleasant memories as those we shall bear away with us.'

Meanwhile, Alejandro questioned Pepito as to how and where he had suffered the accident. The youth contrived the absurd invention of having been attacked by two mountain lions, and that in the fierce struggle he had fallen and injured his head and had lost his carbine. Alejandro was not satisfied with this explanation, and continued to question the sheep-tender.

Realizing that Alejandro was not quite himself, Temescal would have diverted the old shepherd's attention from the unpleasant theme had it not been that Juan sauntered in from the meadow, so intent upon appearing casual that for a minute or two he overlooked

the presence of Pepito. Temescal caught Juan's attention and, with his finger to his lips, signaled silence.

But Juan was in no mood to appreciate either the signal or Temescal's intention. 'I see your eyes still trouble you,' said Juan. 'Yet mine see clearly enough. This is the ladrone who tried to kill us in the barranca this morning. Now that his hat is off, I know him! He fell on the rocks, no? Then ask him how it is that I have his carbine. Ask him!'

'Tried to kill you!' cried Alejandro. 'But you did not tell me of this! What have you to say?'

'No! no! señor! I fell —'

'Pardon!' interrupted Temescal. 'But let the lad speak for himself. My companion may have made a mistake.'

La Luz turned from watching Pepito and stared at Temescal.

Juan pointed at the terrified Pepito. 'But, no! He shot at us — tried to kill us, Señor Alejandro! My friend returned the shot and nicked him on the cabeza. Look for yourself. Ask him.'

'They lie!' cried Pepito. 'They are bandidos. They will murder you, and steal La Luz.'

'You say I lie!' — and Juan strode toward the cringing youth.

'Softly, young soldier!' Temescal raised his hand. 'We all lie, at times. Get the carbine.'

'But I'll get it!' declared Juan, swinging round and marching from the room.

'And now,' continued Temescal, 'let us take example from the wine, which you have declared impartial, Señor Alejandro. My companion says your boy shot at

us this morning. Your boy says he did not. Perhaps each is mistaken.'

La Luz, realizing that her father was in no mood to listen to her, forbore to intercede for Pepito. She could not believe that Pepito had fired at the strangers. They had said nothing about it, and in fact Don Ricardo Temescal had intimated that the soldado Juan might be mistaken. So, finding an excuse to go to her room, she passed near Temescal.

'It is the wine,' she whispered.

'Excellent wine,' said Temescal, nodding.

Juan came in, glanced haughtily at La Luz as she came from her room with a bright manton about her shoulders. Juan laid the carbine, none too gently, upon the table. 'There is the gun which he left on the edge of the barranca,' said Juan. 'Now what has this assassin got to say?'

'Nothing — while you are talking,' declared Temescal. 'Sit down and behave reasonably.' Temescal turned toward Alejandro. 'Señor, as I have consumed more wine than you have, it may be assumed that I contain more impartiality. If you will allow me, I shall hear the arguments in this case. My companion, who is also your guest, accuses this Pepito of attempting to murder us. If your mozo will sit down and hold up his head, we will hear what he has to say.'

'But, señor —' began Juan.

'An irrelevant observation,' said Temescal. 'We will proceed.'

CHAPTER XII

JUAN flung himself into a chair and stared moodily at the candle. 'He lectured me for getting drunk in Santuario,' reflected Juan, 'and now he has taken so much wine that he would defend a murderer. Of a truth, he uses me as if I were his boot-jack, to ease his feet, or to be thrown at the cat, or to be hung on a nail until needed. He will not sing when asked to sing, yet he will bellow loud enough when it suits his purpose. I shall lock my teeth and swallow the key; then we shall see how he prospers!'

Alejandro, his chin on his chest, gazed through his eyebrows at Pepito, who, seated upon the bench near the fireplace, glanced from side to side like a trapped animal.

'My friend Juan seems embarrassed,' observed Temescal. 'Señor Alejandro, may I question your muchacho?'

Alejandro nodded.

'But, first, will you not give the boy a glass of wine?'

'Do you jest, señor?'

'Frequently,' declared Temescal. 'A terrified witness injures his own cause. Give the muchacho a glass of wine.'

Grudgingly Alejandro filled a cup. Pepito drank greedily, and licked his thick lips.

'Your cups are also empty,' said Alejandro, pouring for Juan and Temescal, and not forgetting himself. Juan drank. Temescal left his wine untasted.

'Your name is Pepito?' queried Temescal.

'Si, señor.'

'Is this your carbine?'

'Si, señor. I lost it —'

'Never mind that. It is found. How did you injure your head?'

'I fell on the rocks, señor.'

'Where? There are many rocks.'

Pepito hesitated, then gestured toward the west. 'In the hills. There was a puma that would have stolen one of the lambs —'

'Quite so. But only one puma?'

'I do not remember. I think there were two.'

'And you tried to kill them, fearing that they would steal the sheep?'

'Si! I fired at them a hundred times.'

'Splendid! And there being two, they were not afraid, so one of them leapt at you, perhaps, and frightened you so that you slipped and fell?'

Pepito nodded briskly. 'Si! Si! I dropped my gun and ran —'

'After you fell?'

'I do not remember,' said Pepito, frowning.

'Will you not give him another glass of wine?' asked Temescal, turning toward Alejandro.

Alejandro, muttering, again filled the youth's cup.

'You were afraid to come back and look for your gun?' asked Temescal.

'Si! Also, there was a fire in my head.'

'And so you left it, and gathered together the scattered sheep, and counted them, perhaps?'

Pepito nodded.

Temescal addressed Juan. 'Can you do better, my friend?'

Juan shrugged his shoulders. 'I have no fire in my brain. I am not drunk.'

Temescal drank a little wine, cleared his throat. 'Señor Alejandro, if I had not vouched for the honesty of my companion, I should accept the story which your boy has so cleverly told, and say no more. Yet it is unjust that Juan should be suspected of manhandling the truth. It is possible to convince you that both your boy and my companion are truthful, allowing, of course, for the minor variations of mood and temperament. In fact nothing is impossible. Hence — ' and Temescal turned suddenly upon Pepito — 'why did you try to kill me this morning?' Temescal's movement was sudden, yet his voice was casual, friendly. 'Tell me,' he continued. 'I bear you no malice. None here shall harm you.'

Pepito clung to his stubborn silence like a frightened bear-cub clinging to a high limb. Temescal drew a coin from his pocket and tossed it to the sheep-tender. The youth caught the coin, fingered it, grinned vacuously.

'Why did you try to kill us this morning?'

'I thought you were bandidos. I was afraid you would kill Señor Alejandro and steal La Luz.'

Temescal shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture which implied that the youth's statement was altogether reasonable. 'Truth, without alloy, would be a poor coin for general use,' he declared — and, it must be admitted, somewhat oratorically. 'Contain your annoyance, Señor Alejandro. Rather, censure me for having wounded your muchacho, who,

as he says, saw in us wild animals that would kill and destroy. His imagination naturally runs toward the pastoral, sheep and rocks and cougars. He did the best he could with the raw material. Moreover, it is difficult to think clearly when one's skull has been seared by a bullet, or one's eyes blinded by pepper. Consider, señor: the lad, happening upon the barranca where we were encamped, saw two strangers bearing arms, the one with a bandaged shoulder, the other red-eyed, and doubtless appearing as ferocious as he felt. What were these strangers doing so near your home, and from whence had they come? The lad thought of you, señor, and of La Luz: of the sheep — and if, as Juan intimates, he took a sincere but inaccurate pot-shot at me, it must have been because I offered the more ample target. I am chagrined to have to admit that in replying to his salute, I missed twice — but you will observe the condition of my eyes, and excuse my clumsiness. My companion Juan can hardly be blamed for resenting the assault. Possibly, now that his dignity is satisfied, he will forget it. So we solicit your forbearance, Señor Alejandro, even as we solicit the pardon of your daughter for having caused you this annoyance. It is far to the bottom of my flagon, yet I will risk my head once more. I drink to the loyalty of your faithful but slightly over-zealous Pepito.'

'You are a just man!' declared Alejandro. 'You are generous! You excuse a deadly assault upon your person, translating it to an act of loyalty. Yet I suspect that you have done this to make me more comfortable in my mind, rather than to exonerate my boy. I cannot believe that you count peons so carefully, Don Ricardo.'

'But, yes! A peon is like a copper centavo, señor, a small coin in itself, yet a thousand centavos may be reckoned in gold, of whose potency for good and evil you are quite aware. He who gathers the centavos will rule Mexico. Times are changing. He who would hold power must look to the small coins.'

Alejandro rose and drank, and if his shadow rose unsteadily, blame the flickering light of the candle, which only distorted that which lay beyond its immediate radiance.

Juan, who had tried to appreciate Temescal's attitude toward the pertinent facts in the case, realized that the case had been settled, as it were, out of court. The High Command had ordered a right-about-face. He was a soldier. Moreover, there were other smouldering embers of disappointment to quench, so he drank. 'To the good cause!' he cried, and, quibbling thus, drank — like a soldier.

Temescal's eyes danced with amusement. He more than enjoyed this game of uncovering masked motives, unadvertised preferences, and the host of human concealments, convictions, evasions, and bigotries which in ourselves reflect character, in others, perversity of mind.

'That this thing should have happened!' mourned Alejandro, who was what might be termed an ideal pessimist. He would have continued in this lugubrious strain had not Temescal caught up the guitar and struck from it the sprightly tune, 'The Dance of the Haymakers.' Pepito's fingers twitched. His head moved in rhythm to the tune. Old Alejandro trembled like a brown leaf shaken by a brisk autumn wind. 'So

it went!' he cried, snapping his fingers. Temescal's hand flashed back and forth across the strings. Juan beat time with his foot. Suddenly Pepito laughed, flung up his arms, and, jumping to the middle of the room, began to dance. He leapt and twirled like a young goat capering in a meadow. He stamped his feet and clapped his hands, stung to wild rapture by the rural melody. It was of the soil, as he was.

'But I am not so old!' cried Alejandro, and up went his hands. Opposed to the shepherd boy, he hopped and cavorted as though the tarantella had seized his wits. La Luz laughed, bit her lip, then turned her gaze away.

As abruptly as he had begun the tune, Temescal ceased to play. Alejandro, breathing heavily, tottered to his chair. His face was white, his forehead dappled with silvery beads of sweat. Pepito, snatching up the carbine from the table, whirled about and vanished through the doorway. Juan shrugged his shoulders, telling himself with righteous self-approval that he was not drunk. Alejandro's eyes grew dull. His eyelids flickered. His chin sank to his chest. La Luz stole softly to her room.

Putting the guitar aside, Temescal sat staring at his empty flagon. Juan smiled covertly. It was plain to Juan that Temescal was not looking at him, yet presently Temescal raised his head.

'But, no,' he said slowly, 'you are mistaken.'

Juan shuffled his feet uneasily, rose. . . . Temescal stood beside Alejandro, his hand on the shepherd's shoulder.

'Come, old comrade! The candle has almost burned out.'

Alejandro blinked, roused himself. 'I dreamed that I was a young man . . . the fields of Enramada were green . . . the girls . . .'

'It is midnight, my friend.'

'You are a just man!' declared Alejandro, getting to his feet. He leaned heavily on Temescal, who helped him to his bed.

Then Temescal gathered an armful of sheepskins from the floor, and, followed by Juan, strode out into the still, starlit night. In the shed near the corral they spread the sheepskins and lay down.

Yet Temescal did not say, as was his usual custom, 'Now I shall sleep.' He raised on his elbow. 'No,' he said slowly, 'you are greatly mistaken.'

'Mistaken? About what, señor?'

'Several things. Chiefly about me. You think that I am drunk.'

'I did not say so.'

Temescal ignored Juan's evasion. 'Moreover, you censured me for my leniency toward the boy Pepito.'

'I had nothing to say about that. You held the reins.'

'Further, you are jealous because La Luz showed a marked preference for my society.'

'Por Dios, Don Ricardo! But would you quarrel with me?'

'Softly, young soldier, or you will disturb the chickens. It is a poor comrade who will not engage in fair argument. Have you a cigarette?'

Juan sat up, and taking his cigarrillos from his hat proffered them to Temescal.

'Have you a match?'

Juan produced a match and lighted it.

'A thousand thanks, lieutenant.' Temescal exhaled the fragrant smoke. He drew his sarape about his shoulders. For a while he sat smoking and gazing out across the dim, starlit meadow. 'There is a sign found along American railways which reads: "Stop! Look! Listen!"' he declared finally. 'It would seem that your mind is like a runaway team about to cross the track. Consider me an express train about to cross the road. I have no grudge against the runaway team. I am simply fulfilling a schedule. Of that you may learn more as we progress. Meanwhile, I shall offer an unappreciated confession. I am drunk. Purposely I exonerated the stupid shepherd boy. Deliberately I placed myself in the regard of the girl La Luz. She has beautiful eyes and beautifully modeled ankles. You are not mistaken in realizing that I did these things, but you are mistaken in fumbling about for the reason, which I prefer to keep in my pocket. The boy Pepito is a half-wit. Alejandro is a gentle pessimist, and of a bilious inclination. The girl is of a simple and trusting disposition. Remember, my good friend and loyal companion, it is a shameful thing to confuse a simple mind. And it is a sin to take that which, even when given freely, is given in ignorance. Now I shall sleep.' And Temescal slept.

CHAPTER XIII

A KEEN bright morning beamed upon the green meadow. Shreds of mist clung to the farthest mountain peaks. From the low chimney of the shepherd's house a wand of smoke rose and broke into feathery curls and twistings as it met a mild current of the upper air. Beyond the meadow, where the still trees looked down upon the awakening world, the hillside was patched with pale gold and dusky blue — sunlight and shadow of the slumbrous forest. To breathe such cool fragrance was a joy in itself. To realize such pleasant solitude after much strife and hardship was a temptation to remain and grow wisely content with arcadian simplicity and leisurely days.

Temescal, slowly awakening, rose on his elbow, breathed deep. 'But who, wise enough to tarry, would be satisfied with tarrying forever?' he mused, appreciating the beauty and allurement of the spot as well as his own hereditary restlessness. 'To be satisfied is to die. I prefer the chile to the lotus. Sacaton! But I have a head.'

After a brisk wash in the icy overflow of the mountain spring, Temescal presented himself at the breakfast-table, where, with a whimsical disregard for Alejandro's morning complexion and mood, for Juan's gravity, and the pensiveness of La Luz, he provoked them all to laughter by describing the march of the old alcalde of Santuario from the posada to his home. A second cup of coffee, and Temescal shone like the morning sun. A

third, and he drove the last vestige of a shadow from the room. Concluding his breakfast with a cup of white wine — a potent cordial, yet too dignified a liquor to act hastily — Temescal dispatched Juan to saddle the horses. Alejandro protested, begged that the companions stay longer, argued that Juan's shoulder was not wholly healed; that his guests had not enjoyed sufficient sleep before undertaking their journey. Failing to move Temescal from his purpose, Alejandro finally besought him in the name of friendship to tarry at least one more day, wherein they might discuss the dangers threatening their beloved country.

'You tempt me,' declared Temescal. 'If I stayed another day in this delightful home and this good company, you would make a shepherd of me. And that would occasion you a hardship most unfair. You would have to grow more grapes. Where you are but a wine-cup, I am a flagon. Why, it makes me dizzy even to think of the purple wine frothing in the vats. Should La Luz tread grapes eternally? But, no! I ride from temptation, Señor Alejandro. Moreover, I am Temescal but for a little while. Revised, expurgated, bound by the stiff conventions of my proper office, you would find me a dry book.'

Alejandro nodded musingly. His lips moved, silently shaping the word of his thought. 'He is greater than I had imagined. Yet he ignores my poverty and my deformity, placing me at his own height. He sees no hump on my back. He is somewhat like that magnificent Italian Benvenuto, who converted all things to his own ideals. Until this Temescal came, I was numb with content. I had my few books. Now he has awakened

me. Life stings again. Never will such another come this way.'

Alejandro rose from his chair. 'I detain you. La Luz, find a botella and fill it with the white wine, that our friends may remember us beyond the hills.'

'And years beyond the last drop of it.' Temescal, rising, addressed Alejandro, yet bowed to La Luz.

The shepherd smiled, reflecting that this Temescal was exceedingly human in his significant economy of method.

Juan's arrival with the horses stirred the household to sudden activity. Saddle-bags were packed with food. The canteens were refilled at the spring, the morrals laden with dried corn. Temescal superintended these preparations, not oblivious to Juan's occasional glance toward the doorway. La Luz, after presenting the bottle of wine to the companions, had vanished.

Alejandro embraced Temescal, patted him first upon one shoulder and then upon the other, and blessed him for a great soul and a sturdy friend to Mexico. Alejandro's farewell to Juan was equally courteous, though less ardent.

Regretting that he had not seen La Luz to bid her farewell, Temescal mounted and was exchanging a few last words with Alejandro, when La Luz appeared at the edge of the green meadow, tugging at the lead rope of the white burro. The burro resisted, stubbornly aware that something was expected of him. Juan offered to assist La Luz, but she ignored his offer.

'My daughter is headstrong,' declared Alejandro.

'And beautiful,' observed Temescal.

Alejandro allowed himself to cough politely.

La Luz, laughing, asked Temescal if he would not hold the lead rope while she fetched a saddle. Temescal replied gravely that he was hers to command.

'You are not!' flashed La Luz. 'You command everybody.'

'But, no!' laughed Temescal. 'I am not the President.' And to himself, 'Whew! But the Golden One has a temper!'

'You are leaving — my daughter is excited — she is unused to guests,' apologized Alejandro, as La Luz darted toward the corral.

'My eyes still trouble me slightly,' said Temescal. 'But is it not a saddle your daughter is fetching from the sotechado?'

'Yes. The small saddle for the white one.'

Temescal gazed toward the high range of El Gata. 'The day has not begun,' he murmured. He had observed that La Luz wore sandals, evidently anticipating a journey. But not until she had saddled the burro did she tell her father that she intended to direct the companions on their way. Juan felt immensely flattered, and showed it. Temescal, however, allowed himself no such luxury. 'The girl cares for him,' he reflected. 'Else why the public rebuff, the coy avoidance, and the attenuated farewell, which will be protracted to the very top of yonder mountain range? There she will turn back. Soldier and Shepherdess. But why not?'

Again Alejandro and Temescal exchanged parting felicitations, each assuring the other that neither time nor circumstance could ever obliterate the pleasant memory of their brief companionship. La Luz whacked the white burro, who, having evidently concluded that

further resistance required too much mental effort, set his ears forward, and these he followed at a pace judiciously extended toward the accomplishment of the journey with as little physical effort as possible. Next came Juan, a handsome figure on a restless horse, and behind him rode Temescal, solid, and as aloof as a mountain crag. Yet the cavalcade had scarce got under way when Temescal wheeled his horse and rode back to Alejandro. A word or two and he turned again to follow La Luz and Juan.

Alejandro, shading his eyes with his hand, stood gazing after them until the burro was but a moving white dot on the steep mountain-side. 'A strange man,' mused the shepherd. 'If ever I am in distress or danger, I am to send word to him and I shall not lack a friend. He named a city and he named a name. Of a truth, he must have many guns at his command.'

Taking his staff from beside the doorway, Alejandro set out to find Pepito and the sheep. The youth had not appeared for breakfast. Arriving at the corral, Alejandro found the sheep untended and Pepito absent. Turning the flock out to graze, Alejandro accompanied them, meanwhile anticipating the appearance of Pepito with some childish excuse for his delinquency. Yet noon found the sheep-tender still absent, and old Alejandro leaning on his staff, watching the scattered band as it grazed slowly across the openings in the forest.

From the high trail along which Temescal followed La Luz and Juan, the meadow below soon appeared as but a hand's-breadth of green, and the house of Alejandro no bigger than a thimble. Temescal rode lei-

surely, and made notes in a little book. He finally fell so far behind his companions that La Luz suggested that they wait for him. Yet, when they stopped to breathe their horses on some steep, grim slope of the range, Temescal invariably stopped and made notes in a careful hand. Finally the trail became a mere goat-path running to an impassable point of rocks, where it switched back and climbed, in steep windings, to a higher spot, so that Temescal was presently below the travelers, who had stopped, employing the time in sprightly argument.

'Then you will not promise?' came Juan's voice as though through a telephone.

'But why should I promise anything? You are going away. You will not come back.'

Temescal uttered a loud, sonorous 'Humm!' intended to warn those above that he was, at least perpendicularly, in their vicinity.

'But I swear'— Juan's voice subsided. A few scattering pebbles fell upon Temescal's sombrero.

Then the voice of La Luz came distinctly. 'Take your arm away! I can reach it.'

'But you will fall!' cried Juan.

Temescal heard La Luz laugh. He looked up, but could see nothing save the shouldering rock and the brush above him. Something fluttered out from the cliff, dropping softly. A blue flower, its long stem swinging like a pendulum, fell in front of Temescal's horse. The horse snorted. Temescal put his notebook into his pocket, and, dismounting, picked up the blue flower and thrust its stem through the band of his sombrero.

The crunching of hoofs above, and Temescal again

gave his horse the rein. At the next bend he caught sight of Juan and La Luz. She waved to him.

'It is a very steep way,' she called, laughing. 'It is well to take one's time.'

'A singularly sweet reminder — for some one,' mused Temescal. Again he made notes in the little book. He gazed at the trail ahead, then down at the tiny green meadow. 'And Sanchez said there was no trail across these hills. It remained for his chief to find it. Sacaton! But the blue spaces play with one's imagination! My thumb would cover Alejandro's house, and crush it. My hand, held so, erases the green meadow. As for the desert, it has become but the dooryard of this citadel. And yonder, a long day's journey, yet but one vigorous leap from here, is Santuario — and Temescalita. But I hope the little one is as comfortable as her foster-mother's proportions. A magnificent woman, in her proper sphere.'

At the next bend Temescal's stout horse stopped and stood gazing out across the magic distances, yet with ears alert to the sound of plodding hoofs above. Temescal had closed his mind to the morning vistas, the rough trail, the companions so blithely ascending the great mountain-side. He concentrated on the vision of Temescalita as he had last seen her, a wisp of humanity in the ample arms of the Mother-of-Many. 'Yet I will not give up the niña,' he declared. 'The adorable Mariquita will not be pleased. She will arch her fine eyebrows and condemn me with her eyes. And she will not believe a word of my story. Yet I shall not give up the waif!' Which might indicate that the foundling Temescalita held a secure place in Temescal's affections. It was

well known in the City of Mexico that the aristocratic Señorita Mariquita Valladares — the bright star of Temescal's not infrequent poetical enthusiasms — favored Don Ricardo above all men.

Abruptly dismissing the vision and the argument, Temescal rode on up the final long stretch of trail. A thin high wind droned across the barren ridge. The air was chill in spite of the bright sun.

La Luz stood beside the burro, her short skirt whipping about her legs. Juan, standing near La Luz, turned and gazed out across the far reaches as Temescal appeared. The eyes of La Luz were exceedingly bright, her face rosy. Temescal surmised that the two had arrived at an understanding.

Both La Luz and Juan were startled by Temescal's brusque 'Que es?' and for a few seconds were at a loss to understand his challenge.

Then La Luz caught sight of a familiar figure approaching along the ridge of the mountain. 'Pepito!' she cried. Carbine in hand and a pack slung across his shoulders, Pepito came stumbling along the ridge, his chest heaving, his thick lips trembling.

'What of the sheep?' queried La Luz.

Pepito flung up his arm in a wild gesture. 'But I have no sheep! I go.'

'Where?' asked Temescal.

'With you, señor. I make the fire. I cook for you. I fight for you. I guard the horses at night. I am a good boy, señor!'

'You would be my mozo?'

'Si, señor. I ask no pay. I am strong. I can go as fast as a horse.'

'Hum! Fast enough to forget what your patron, the good Señor Alejandro, has done for you?'

'He gave me no pay, and I am a man. I am his mozo no longer. You gave me money.'

'Hum! And in doing so did my host an injury. Yet it was heady wine.'

Juan smiled. He enjoyed what he imagined was Temescal's discomfiture.

'But he will go back to the sheep when you leave,' said La Luz, shrugging indifferently.

'I will not go back!' cried Pepito, brandishing his carbine and dancing up and down in his excitement.

Swift as the beat of a bird's wing La Luz reached down. The thin bright blade of a knife flashed in her hand. 'Insolent!' she cried.

Bending forward in the saddle, Temescal caught her wrist, gazed at her flushed face and burning eyes. 'I admire your grace, though not your intent, little wild-cat,' said Temescal.

The eyes of La Luz became like dark pools mirroring two star points of anger. The knife slipped from her hand. The star points of anger faded, disappeared, were replaced by a look of wonderment.

Temescal let go her wrist, dismounted leisurely, and, picking up the little knife, held it toward her on his palm. Pepito stared, licked his lips. Juan made a noise in his throat and strode up and down restlessly. La Luz took the knife from Temescal. A flash of her bare knee and she had sheathed the knife, and was again gazing at Temescal's grave face.

'If your Pepito would serve me, he shall,' declared Temescal.

'But, señor—' Juan raised his hand, hesitated, glanced sharply from Temescal to La Luz.

Temescal heard only the thin whisper of the wind across the barren ridge. 'You would serve me?' he asked Pepito.

'Si, señor!'

'Then you shall. Do you swear to obey me?'

'To the death, señor.'

'Not necessarily. Return, then, to your work. The Señor Alejandro is my good friend. Obey him as you would obey me. Guard him from all evil as you would guard me. Give him and his daughter the respect that you would give to me.' Temescal glanced at La Luz. Then to the shepherd boy: 'Be faithful in this service, for I may return.'

Juan's eyebrows arched in amazement. The face of La Luz was suffused with deeper color.

Temescal mounted his horse. He touched the blue flower in the band of his sombrero. 'Perhaps it fell from heaven,' he said. 'Quien sabe?'

'Like your daughter Temescalita,' volunteered Juan maliciously.

Yet Temescal seemed to hear only the thin whisper of the wind across the barren ridge. Bowing to La Luz, he reined his horse to the farther side of the ridge. Juan mounted and followed, bidding La Luz a curt farewell.

Alone on the ridge, La Luz stood watching the two horsemen until they had reached the floor of the desert toward the west. Pepito had gone. The white burro, disliking the unfriendly wind, had also vanished. Halfway down the mountain, La Luz overtook the burro, yet did not ride, but drove him ahead of her. Before

she reached the green meadow, she stopped and pressed her mouth against her wrist, where Temescal had grasped it. Entering the house, she found Alejandro waiting for her. She ran to him and flung her arms about his neck.

'It is all right, my daughter,' said Alejandro, patting her shoulder. 'That rogue Pepito has come back.'

Yet her question startled the old shepherd. 'Is Don Ricardo Temescal married?'

'I do not know. Why do you ask?'

'I do not think that he is married,' said La Luz. 'Yet the other spoke of Don Ricardo's daughter Temescalita.'

'But what of it?' Then, shrewdly: 'Don Ricardo is a great man among his own people. His ways are not our ways. Accident brought him here. I doubt that he will ever return. As for the abandoned child he rescued, he told me about that, calling the infant Temescalita.'

La Luz kissed her father, then, running to the fireplace, knelt and laid wood upon the embers.

'But he said he might return,' declared La Luz over her shoulder.

'The young soldier?'

'No, Don Ricardo Temescal.'

'He told you so?'

'No. He told Pepito.'

'Ah, that is different!' murmured Alejandro. Then, quickly, 'Where was Pepito?'

'On the mountain. Don Ricardo made him go back.'

'Tell me about it, my daughter. Pepito told me he had been hunting cougars. I knew he was not speaking the truth.'

Temescal

'I will tell you,' said La Luz, 'if you will tell me about Don Ricardo's daughter Temescalita.'

'You are persistent. I shall give you the story as it was given to me. The wind of the mountains has made your eyes very bright, my little one.'

CHAPTER XIV

ALTHOUGH Alejandro had assured Temescal that there was a trail down the western slope of the range, he was surprised to find a comparatively broad and easy way, in places hewn from the solid rock. The lower slope of the mountain-side was treeless, lacking even the usual vegetation found in the foothills. Temescal paid close attention to the immediate surroundings, occasionally jotting down a line or two in his notebook. Since leaving the shepherd's home, he seemed to have developed an interest in the topography of the country, a circumstance which amused Juan, to whom a tree was a tree, a rock a rock, and an unusually well-made trail merely a matter of immediate convenience.

Juan rode buoyantly, pleased that no difficulties offered. Once in a while he thought of La Luz, soothing his wounded vanity with the promise that sometime he would return in solitary splendor, with no towering contrast to diminish his own excellent stature, and woo and win the shepherd's daughter with a mere word and a glance. Hitherto his conquests had been effortless; and now, riding down the easy sweep and return of the wide way, he enjoyed a certain freedom of mind, for the young soldier was unaccustomed to deliberate love-making. The arid immensity of the desert below did not appall him. For Juan, to-morrow's possible exigencies were to-morrow's business. However, he did survey the expanse below from time to time, looking for a chance blot of green that might indicate the presence of water.

An ancient mine, halfway down the slope of the desert range, explained the laboriously made trail. At the mouth of the mine, Juan waited until Temescal caught up with him.

Juan was for exploring the old workings. 'There might be gold still here,' he suggested.

'And so,' said Temescal, who arrived leisurely, twirling a blue flower by its long stem, 'let it sleep. We look for water.'

'But, señor!' — Juan dismounted swiftly and picked a human skull from a litter of loose rock and dust — 'men have been here.' The fragile brown skull crumbled to powder in his hands.

'Obviously — and they have vanished. *We* are here. Where shall we be to-morrow?'

'In the tierra caliente, of course,' said Juan, dusting his hands.

Temescal smiled. 'Yes; in the hot country. Last night I dreamed of vultures. Let us find our way down.'

Juan gazed round at the mountain-side, the masses of broken rock, the afternoon desert below, and finally at the cloudless sky. 'Of a truth, it is an empty land. Why do we journey this way, señor?'

'Because of a falling rock in the cañon near Cabazon, perhaps. But a few days ago you served a colonel, who now serves a larger purpose than he could have imagined.'

'But when he was alive, he served the Republic of Mexico,' declared Juan. 'He is dead. How can he serve now?'

'By his silence, my friend. He keeps his hands in his own pockets.'

'Of a truth we took much loot that he never shared with his men.'

'Quite so. This ancient mine gapes like the mouth of a dead man. Let us find our way down.'

Again Juan glanced roundabout, and finally, looking up at the sky, 'Por Dios!' he cried. 'The vultures!'

Temescal glanced toward the sky, shook his head. 'Not vultures. Eagles.'

Even as he spoke a faint, shrill whistle sounded in the far blue, where an eagle, rounding in easy flight, whistled his angry challenge. From some viewless crag in the barren brown hills came an echoing challenge, and presently another eagle swept out, circled, and darted toward the first. They struck in mid-air. A tuft of feathers, like a puff of smoke, floated beneath them. The great birds swayed and separated. Circling in shorter sweeps, again they drove together, became a blur of flapping wings. And again they dropped away from each other, rose to circle above the scattering feathers that floated down, twinkling in the keen sunlight.

'They fight!' cried Juan.

Temescal shrugged his shoulders. 'My dream was of carrion birds, not of royal wings.'

Lower the eagles dropped, as they struck and separated in vicious combat. Maneuvering on tilted wings, they grappled and fell together, tumbling over and over until within a few feet of the hillside rock, when they fought free in a cloud of dancing plumes. Swerving sharply upward, one of the eagles sailed out across the desert level close to the ground, its huge shadow a fleeting blotch on the glimmering sand. The other, un-

able to rise, spread its wings weakly and, rocking from side to side, alighted on the trail a few yards from the mouth of the ancient mine.

Temescal dismounted and walked toward the wounded eagle, which raised its wings heavily, sheathed them, and sat blinking and turning its head.

'Stand away, señor, and I will kill it,' cried Juan.

'Spoken like a soldier!' said Temescal. 'But you will not kill it.'

'But, señor, it is wounded. It will die.'

'But, señor,' mocked Temescal, 'you were wounded, and you did not die.' And Temescal gravely saluted the vanquished eagle, which, despite its torn plumage and its many wounds, thrust its head forward threateningly and ruffled its neck plumage in defiance.

A falling plume, darting hither and thither in a queer, jerky motion, dropped on the trail. Temescal picked up the feather, smoothed it between his thumb and finger. Juan holstered his gun, made a cigarette, and sat watching his companion. Of a truth, this Temescal was inconsistent; one minute urging haste that they might make camp, and the next, delaying to salute a bedraggled eagle blinking in the shadows of an old Aztec mine, as though the place were a shrine and the bird a deity.

Did Temescal salute the high courage of wide and dauntless wings, or did he bare his head to a sign and a portent? Was his vision of the old and the young eagles of Mexico, warring until the banner of the Republic was but a torn and ragged emblem of anarchy and devastation?

'And next — the vultures,' murmured Temescal.

In the evening dusk, specked here and there with the promise of early stars, the companions arrived at the spring at the foot of the mountain trail. A solitary and notably tall palm marked the spring, its mantle of pendent, withered fronds reaching up and up to a canopy of living green, spread like a bursting rocket against the sky. Temescal bowed to the solitary and ancient palm.

Juan, struck by that which he considered an especially humorous affection, laughed. 'If there were a thousand palms —' he said, and hesitated because Temescal had turned and faced him so swiftly.

'A nod would then suffice,' said Temescal quietly. He smiled, but only with his lips. 'Yet isolated and exceptional verdure in a barren land — greenness so unexpected that it suggests daring, almost impudence — is not unworthy of acknowledgment. Pardon me for an oversight.' And Temescal bowed formally to Juan.

Juan chewed the end of his short mustache, and eyed Temescal aslant and vindictively. This Temescal was arbitrarily exceeding the most elastic limitations of forbearance. Moreover, he had become secretive, having made notes in a little book, a circumstance which, unexplained, impressed Juan as something unfair to their association, something mysterious and savoring of treachery. And in the band of Temescal's sombrero was the faded blue flower which La Luz had tossed down to him.

Hat in hand, Temescal gazed at Juan. 'Let us have the rest of it,' he said as he gestured toward the darkening desert. 'We are about to endure a bitter hardship together, or separately. In either case it is best to begin our journey with clean faces.'

'As for that,' declared Juan airily, 'I can find my way back to Alejandro's house.'

'Even so — let's have the rest of it, Juanito.'

Juan, to escape further embarrassment, had begun to unsaddle the horses. He straightened up, the loosened cincha in his hand. With the other hand he gesticulated. 'All day you ride — and say nothing. You frown, and write in a small book. When I spoke of exploring the mine, you declared against it. When I would have shot the wounded eagle, you forbade me. And now you mock me by bowing to me and comparing me to a palm-tree.'

'So? Then I made a grave mistake. The palm, though green, is discreetly silent. It mocks no reverence. Did I laugh when you paid a most proper respect to your chosen Saint in the church of Santuario? Have I ever mocked you when you have crossed yourself? If my salutation to living water and the isolated verdure of the desert strikes you as humorous, and you laugh, do you not mock, first, the tree itself, and incidentally my sincerity and reverence? Consider. . . . Meanwhile, let us enjoy a touch of the good wine which Alejandro blessed in the name of friendship. Here is the botella. La Luz of the green meadow trod the grapes. Drink, compadre!' And Temescal proffered the bottle with such a large graciousness that the young soldado could not have refused, even had he been without thirst.

Temescal, in turn, tasted the wine and replaced the bottle in his saddle-bag. 'As for the jottings in my little book, Juanito, they are the notes of a song which, some day, you may hear sung by the many. It grows dark. We shall feed the horses. Then we shall have a fire, good food, and a better understanding. The afternoon

has been so unproductive of excitement and hazard that we have suffered from idleness, which is the supreme test of companionship. Let us become industrious and make camp.'

Activity absorbed a measure of Juan's sour humor, and the good wine tuned his pulse to a happier theme. Yet, like the proverbial grouse, that, having ceased its challenging, still struts and ruffles its neck feathers, Juan set about his task of making camp with a fling at this and a jerk at that, which amused Temescal, who, having spread his saddle-blanket, sat smoking a cigarrillo and gazing, apparently, at the inquisitive stars. Darkness and the utter solitude magnified each slight sound — the crunching of the corn as the horses nosed in their morrals contentedly, the rustle of the withered fronds above their heads, the lisp of Juan's footsteps as he moved about gathering scraps and shreds of bark for the evening fire. Still Temescal remained motionless, aloof, silent, yet radiating an alertness of spirit which subdued Juan and made him feel uncomfortably aware of himself. Ordinarily sprightly and loquacious, Temescal's silence was impressive, almost awesome. Juan felt that he himself ought to say something, that Temescal ought to say something, and that something greater than a barrier of darkness separated them. Presently Juan thought of La Luz, pictured her astride the white burro, riding up the rugged mountain trail; and again, standing upon the barren crest, the high wind whipping her skirt about her knees, as she pointed toward the gray desert and the far blue hills beyond. And the young soldier yearned for the companionship of La Luz, for the sound of her voice, her laughter, the quick,

questioning glance of her dark eyes. Some day he would return, alone . . .

Juan knelt and touched a match to the shreds of palm fiber. A thin flame rose in the still air — a slender spear-point that wavered and spread among the brittle fronds. In the soft glow of the flame Juan's face, ardently intense with a vision, was like the keen, bronze face of that ancient Aztec prince Quauhtemotzin, the heroic, the splendid, the defiant. Of a truth, Lieutenant Juan Sepulveda dwelt for a minute in a romance more real to him than was the flame before which he knelt.

'La Luz,' said Temescal softly.

Startled by Temescal's voice, by the name itself, so significant at the moment — although Temescal had ample excuse to remark upon 'the light' which had leaped so suddenly out of the darkness — Juan rose and recalled the present by a word.

'Then you are not a rock?' he observed, gesturing to the shattered hillside boulders about their camp.

'Only upon occasion. The wine and my empty stomach have become reconciled. The wine has won the battle. No, I am not a rock, although I must impress you as stolid, uncompanionable, and stubborn. It is my misfortune sometimes to imagine myself as enduring and immovable as a rock. Call me, rather, a feather — the feather of an eagle, if you will, serving a purpose in its place; detached, a fluttering thing which falls to earth and is picked up, perhaps, by some shepherd and stuck in his hat. Your fire is beneficent, its light doubly illuminating. Watching you at your ministrations, I thought of Quauhtemoc — of the Plaza de la Reforma, and my beloved city. Let us eat. We have meat and

bread and water, and the top of the world for our table. And who' — and Temescal gestured toward the sky — 'has more candles? Again I mention the light. A coincidence. Speaking of light, did it ever dawn upon you, my friend, that we of Mexico are of two minds about everything? Our blood is of the Aztec defenders and the Spanish conquerors. We leap from barbarism to piety, and back again — hop into the fire and scurry like singed wolves for a water-hole — I speak of the soul — and most of us are born too slothful even to wonder why we do it. Sacaton! But white wine on an empty stomach discovers the shallow spots in one's cosmos. I have said little and talked much. Let us eat.'

CHAPTER XV

PEPITO, out early with the sheep, herded them toward the flats east of the Red Barranca, and, as they found good grazing, he amused himself by playing a game which did not interfere with his lazy occupation. He gathered together stones from the dry river-bed and with laborious patience builded a crude statue which ludicrously resembled a man. With two dead branches for the arms and a round stone for the head, the statue looked like a prehistoric scarecrow. Pepito leaned his carbine against one of the rigid arms and stepped back to view his handiwork. Pepito had fashioned the image of his present deity Temescal.

Taking from his handkerchief the coin which the great patron had given him, Pepito carefully laid it on the statue's unoccupied arm. Not the first in the world to worship a stone image or a golden coin, the shepherd boy paid tribute to his own creation by dancing madly in front of the statue. His face glistened with sweat. He panted like a dog in from a long run. Finally he ceased his wild dancing and sat down that he might admire his god. Of a truth, there stood the magnificent Temescal, pardoner, protector of the poor, and master of melody! Yet, having regained his breath, Pepito decided that the ceremony was incomplete. Through habit he climbed to the edge of the barranca and surveyed the sheep, grazing slowly toward the edge of the desert. Returning to his stone image, he snatched up the coin and pocketed it. Then he addressed himself to

the statue, imitating Temescal's sonorous voice. 'Return, then, to your work. The Señor Alejandro is my good friend. Obey him as you would obey me. Guard him from all evil as you would guard me.' Pepito frowned, brushed his hand across his eyes. He could not recall the rest of Temescal's admonition. Again Pepito bowed to the image. 'Si, señor! I am a good boy! I am strong! I can go as fast as a horse.' And to illustrate his declaration, he imitated the cavortings of a restless horse, prancing, snorting, nickering, and tossing his head until he was again breathless. He stood, thumping his chest, his heavy features glowing with fanatical ecstasy. He rushed to the edge of the barranca. The sheep had drifted farther away. Suddenly the band bunched and broke back toward the foothills in a long surging billow of dusty white. The shepherd boy rubbed his eyes. Out on the desert, bordering the foothills, a band of horsemen drew slowly toward the barranca. Behind them trailed a lazy cloud of dust. Screened by the intervening contours of the rocky foothills, Pepito watched the approaching horsemen. Who were these strange invaders of his world? And why did they stop? But they had seen the sheep! Two riders spurred swiftly after the pattering sheep. Pepito heard the thin reiterated crack of rifle-shots. He slunk up the barranca, climbed its northern wall. Beyond him toward the east, where the barranca widened to the desert, the strangers had gathered. The smoke of a fire rose above them as they squatted on the ground. These, then, were bad men, stealers of sheep, bandidos!

Pepito saw a figure move from the group and descend into the barranca, evidently to get water. The man

paused and surveyed the stone image, then thrust his foot against it. It toppled to the ground. Pepito could hear the faint thump and rattle of the stones as they tumbled down.

That these men had killed his patron's sheep and were roasting them was in itself an outrage. But that one of them should dare to shatter the magnificent image — Temescal! Pepito chewed his lip, shook as though with a fever, whined like a dog that mourns, and, with tears of rage blurring his eyes, crept back through the morning shadows. Arriving at the trail to the green meadow, he pattered up to the casa, breathless.

'The sheep!' he cried, as he saw Alejandro seated in his chair in the doorway.

'What now, muchacho?'

'The sheep! Ladrones! The Red Barranca! They have broken my stone man! They will murder us and steal the silver crucifix and the beautiful guitarra!'

La Luz, who was scrubbing the table, glanced up. 'You have been asleep in the sun, and have dreamed a bad dream. Go back to the sheep.'

'But, no! I have been awake! I have been much awake! I made a stone picture of the one who sings. Ai! Ai! Ai! The pigs have destroyed it!' — and Pepito wept bitterly.

Alejandro glanced over his shoulder toward La Luz. 'Perhaps —' he said, and was silent.

La Luz wiped the table hastily, ran to her room, and put on her sandals. 'I shall see,' she declared.

'I shall go with you,' said Alejandro.

Pepito, brandishing his carbine, and unconsciously shedding tears of rage and excitement, followed them

to a point of rock on the mountain-side, from whence they could look down upon the desert. In the distant barranca were the tiny figures of men and of horses and the smoke of a fire. Pepito squatted on a rock and blinked up at Alejandro, who, shading his eyes with his hand, contemplated the billowing smoke which rose and vanished in the clear morning air.

Alejandro shook his head. 'The others have but departed, and these come,' he muttered.

La Luz caught his meaning, wondered why these marauders had followed so swiftly in Temescal's footsteps.

'But, no!' said Alejandro. 'He is an honest man. These may be rurales. Yet they are many — and they have killed my sheep. Rurales would have first found me and asked for food. Is it that the shadow of the Thief of Cabazon will follow me to my grave?'

'Perhaps, when the thieves are fed, they will go their way,' suggested La Luz.

'He said that he had many guns at his command,' murmured Alejandro.

'Yet what could they want of us, except food and wine?' asked La Luz. 'We have no money, my father.'

Alejandro shook his head, muttered, turned toward his daughter. 'You were too small to remember.' Then to Pepito: 'Catch the white burro. If these bad ones come, they will find an empty house. If they should chance to be honest men, they will depart. Would that Temescal and the young soldado were here!'

Pepito and La Luz hastened down the trail.

Alejandro followed slowly. He paused to gaze out

across the foothills. 'Yet they may not come. And they have not seen La Luz.'

Hoping against hope, the shepherd made ready to depart, gathering together a few scant necessities, food, water, blankets, which he packed on the white burro. La Luz filled a sack with the choicest of their possessions, the silver crucifix, the carved flagon, the old Spanish clock, which she wrapped in the beautiful silk manton which had been her mother's. Observing that La Luz worked swiftly and with enthusiasm, Alejandro asked her if she realized that they might never return to their home.

'Si!' she said, glancing up. 'So it is that we leave none of these things for the thieves.'

'Yet, as it is, the burro is laden heavily.'

'But I am strong. I can carry these. And Pepito has nothing but his old carbine.'

'I will carry the beautiful guitarra,' suggested Pepito, to whom the exodus now appealed as the beginning of a wonderful adventure. They would follow where Temescal had gone — perhaps overtake him.

'But, no!' Alejandro spoke sharply. 'You will not take the guitarra. You will carry the pack which La Luz has made ready. Are we men, that my daughter should go laden like a burro?'

'Am I a burro?' whined Pepito as he shouldered the sack, which he pretended was too heavy for his strength. That the beautiful guitarra should be left behind!

Alejandro's final task was to fetch a cask of wine from the hillside cellar. He placed the cask on the table, purposely. The sooner the bandidos discovered the wine and became drunk, the better. Then they would be-

come more or less indifferent to the obviously sudden departure of the family.

'We shall camp in the hills and watch,' declared Alejandro, as they crossed the green meadow, La Luz leading the burro, Pepito groaning beneath the sack, and Alejandro, staff in hand, and sarape over his shoulder, following. Occasionally he paused and glanced back. If they could reach the shelter of the hills before the marauders arrived at the house. . .

At the end of the first rise in the mountain trail, La Luz stopped to adjust her sandals. Alejandro turned to gaze down at the silent meadow, the abandoned home. Pattering up the trail came the goat, the milch goat, called by Pepito 'Evil-Face' because of a malignantly human expression in the animal's yellow eyes.

Again they moved on, climbing steadily, the goat only making erratic pauses to snatch wisps of withered grass from the crevices among the rocks. Stopping on a higher reach, they saw that the barranca was empty of men and horses, nor were these to be seen on the gray stretch of desert, either toward the north or south.

'They have gone!' said Pepito.

'Yet until we know which way they travel — make haste' — and Alejandro whacked the burro with his staff.

Just before they reached the top of the range, they observed a movement in the meadow far below — a movement like the scurrying of a swarm of black ants. The invaders had discovered the hidden homestead.

Alejandro drew his sarape about his shoulders, and, breasting the keen wind, searched for a place to camp, finally discovering a shelter among huge riven gray

rocks which walled three sides of a sort of roofless room. 'Here we shall wait,' he declared. 'When those below have departed, we shall return to our home.'

La Luz, arranging their belongings to the best advantage, made ready for the evening meal. Pepito, who had gone to look for firewood, had not returned. La Luz made her father comfortable, and, noticing the dull despair that filmed his eyes, tried to console him.

'See!' she cried, pointing to the milch goat, which lay with its legs folded under, its staring yellow eyes half-closed, its lower jaw working as though it were chewing gum. 'Evil-Face is content. And the white one' — La Luz shrugged — 'with nothing to do, he is always content.'

'And you, my daughter?'

The rich color deepened in the olive cheeks of La Luz. Her dark eyes flashed. 'If I were a man, those who kill our sheep should know me!'

'Once I knew such a fire,' declared Alejandro, 'but the years have taught me to fold my hands.'

'You would not kill? A bandido killed my mother.'

'He is beyond my reach. And even his name is not so bitter to me since Don Ricardo was our guest. I shall go out and see what has become of Pepito.'

Alone on the windswept crest the hunchback shepherd stood gazing toward the western desert, a wide sea of palpitating amethyst, dotted with purple-shadowed islands of desert cone and ridge. Bulwarked round the far splendor of the setting sun rose fantastic golden imageries — spires and domes and glowing minarets set upon cloudy terraces amid vales of opal fire. And out there, somewhere upon the vast floor of the evening

desert — Alejandro gestured as though to a departing friend — journeyed Temescal, in whom he had discovered an ideal of his youth, a caballero graced with courtesy, tolerance, and true courage.

Turning from the enchantment and the vision, Alejandro crossed the bleak ridge and gazed down upon the darkening valley of his home, where somber shadows lay upon the evening forest, and where, within the dim boundaries of the meadow, a tiny flame flickered and glowed like the evil eye of some awakening monster of the night. Alejandro's staff trembled in his clenched hand. Down there glowered that malignant beast banditry, which years ago had made La Luz motherless and himself a fugitive, forced to flee into the wilderness to escape the devastating hand of one then known throughout Mexico as Temescal the Ruthless — Temescal the Thief of Cabazon.

Leaning against the wind, the shepherd plodded back to his refuge among the rocks, where, in the red glow of the setting sun, knelt La Luz, milking the goat.

'You did not see Pepito?'

Alejandro shook his head.

'The witless one!' cried La Luz. 'Where could he have gone?'

'He is scratching some flea of discontent. He listens only to the wind since Temescal has left us.'

CHAPTER XVI

HAD Alejandro continued on across the range, instead of making camp on the crest, no doubt Pepito would have found enough interest in the adventure to keep out of mischief. He resented the interruption to their journey. Moreover, he was grieved because the beautiful guitarra had been left behind. So, waiting until La Luz was absorbed in arranging their belongings, Pepito stole out across a jutting ridge which overhung the valley, and squatted on his heels, wondering what was going on in the evening meadow below. Curiosity, resentment, and the ceaseless and irritating pressure of the wind strung his nerves to a high pitch. He grunted like an animal, hunched his heavy shoulders as though being whipped, peered down into the valley. When darkness came, he would return to the casa and get the beautiful guitarra!

A long and toilsome journey down the mountain-side and back meant nothing to him. No wild goat was more at home among those perilous, rocky ways, either in sunshine or starlight. And no Galahad yearned more ardently to behold the mystic beauty of the hidden Grail than the half-witted shepherd boy to touch the murmuring strings of the magic guitarra. Pepito imagined he could hear the guitar calling to him as it had called when that bold and fearsome stranger, Temescal, had made it sing and laugh and twitter to the primitive, mad rhythm of 'The Dance of the Haymakers.'

With intense glee, Pepito imitated the slinking re-

treat of a marauding panther, as he disappeared like a shred of mist among the rocky terraces and crags of the mountain-side.

Deep in the shadows of the timbered valley, he circled the meadow, where round a huge fire lounged many ragged, swarthy men, who laughed, jested, or argued whiningly, or sat morosely staring at the flames.

Creeping round to the back of the adobe, Pepito crawled up and crouched against the wall beneath the high window. He heard men talking. He gathered from their conversation that they planned to cross the range of El Gata that night. Pepito forgot all about the beautiful guitarra. His nearness to the bandidos frightened him. He realized the actuality of that which upon the mountain-crest had seemed but a vague picture and a very distant menace. And, as the mood of fear seized him, he seemed to hear Temescal's voice: 'The Señor Alejandro is my good friend. Guard him from all evil as you would guard me . . .'

Trembling up from his shadow against the adobe wall, Pepito stole out across the narrow clearing back of the house. Once within the befriending forest, he moved swiftly toward the somber bulk of the mountain, struck into the starlit trail, and pattered up the ascent. Halfway up the mountain-side he stopped. Through the still air, like the ethereal, sweet warbling of some viewless bird in a deep cañon, came singing. Pepito immediately thought of the guitar. He groaned, flung his hat down upon the trail, and danced on it with the quick viciousness of an antelope stamping a snake to death with its sharp hoofs.

'They have stolen my beautiful guitarra!' he wailed.

Snatching up his hat, he trotted to the crest. 'The bandidos!' he cried, as he came to the opening in the rocks. 'They come!'

'Idiot!' said La Luz, 'cease your howling. Where have you been?'

'Is it thus that you obey me?' queried Alejandro.

'Señor! I have been down there. I heard the ladrones say that they would cross El Gata very soon. I heard them say it! I am a good boy, señor!'

'You have been among the thieves!'

'But they did not see me. I heard them say they would cross El Gata.'

Having partaken of bread and goat's milk, they gathered together their few blankets and utensils, and hastily packed the white burro. Beneath the cold brilliance of the stars they drew out from their shelter to face the chill and unceasing wind which warred against their progress like the steady pressure of an invisible hand.

Pepito led the way, his eagerness restrained by Alejandro, who persisted in testing each doubtful shadow with his staff, fearing it concealed the edge of some precipice. Yet, once upon the actual descent, with the white burro occasionally sniffing at the tracks made by the horses of Temescal and Juan, Alejandro urged haste, having given up all hope of ever returning to his valley and his home. The ladrones had discovered the spot, and at least some of them would eventually return to it, no matter where they journeyed in the meantime.

Only too well aware that they might not survive the desert should they escape from those who followed, Alejandro silently petitioned the Mother of Sorrows to re-

tain his family in her mercy. The future seemed very doubtful. Only one hope remained; through some great good fortune they might overtake Temescal — whose arm reached far and who had many guns at his command.

While Alejandro, trudging down the trail along the dark mountain slope, speculated upon the future, La Luz and Pepito attended to the immediate necessity for haste, by urging the burro, who, for once in his indolent career, stepped briskly, as though pricked by a sudden resolve to atone for much laziness and stubbornness.

The drone of the upland wind had long since ceased. Occasionally a puff of warm air eddied up from the dim spaces of the desert. Their very haste, made possible by the easy trail, served to increase their fear. They fled from an invisible danger as though it were visible and in actual pursuit. Slowly the vague, gray desert floor, glimmering softly in the starlight, rose to meet them. Presently they were beneath the giant palm.

With a match cupped in his hands, Alejandro knelt and examined the ground. Discovering the feathery ashes of Temescal's camp-fire, he rose. 'Here they camped. See if the burro will drink. Already Evil-Face has discovered the spring. Make haste!'

Pepito, on hands and knees, explored the vicinity to determine the direction Temescal had taken. 'This way they went!' he called finally.

'Toward the hills of Santa Rosalia,' said Alejandro. 'Sanctuary!'

Dread of discovery, of capture, warred ceaselessly against his hope of safety. Within a few hours, at most, the ladrones would have reached the crest of El Gata.

Before dawn they would be traversing the western slope of the range. Daylight would uncover tracks round the desert spring — tracks which the bandidos would read instantly and instantly understand.

'We have the night, and a few short hours of vantage,' declared Alejandro. 'Let us go.'

They had progressed but a mile or so beyond the foot of the range when La Luz realized that the milch goat was not following them. Yet La Luz said nothing of this to her father. If the goat had gone back to the green meadow, it was as well. It would seem that Evil-Face knew on which side of the range the grass grew.

CHAPTER XVII

A HOT wind drove across the great llano which lay between the barren foothills of El Gata and the far-seen range of Santa Rosalia, a dim, blue ridge against the western sky. The morning sun, like a huge, inflamed eye, blinked red through a coppery haze of desert dust. The faded green of the mesquite, the richer hue of yuccas and tornilla, accentuated the bleak aridness, the sinister austerity of the sandy plain, known to the natives of the hills as 'The Valley of Desolation.'

As the extreme heat had not yet burned through the thin haze which masked the sun, Temescal and Juan rode briskly, pursuing their long angling shadows which danced mockingly ahead in ragged caricature of man and horse.

Within an hour the sun had surmounted the coppery haze. A blinding glare lay upon the glittering white plain, dotted with forlorn islands of cacti and mesquite. Like the stealthy undulations of a tide, light films of sand heaved lazily across the placid surface of the desert, discovering the erratic current of the subsiding wind. The desert floor seemed in motion, suggesting the slow awakening of some gargantuan beast.

But recently, in the cool perspective of memory, Temescal had eulogized the desert, declaring the waste lands sanctuary, alluring, and strangely beneficent. In the furnace itself, he gave his gaze to the ground, and his consciousness to the condition of his horse. Possibly Temescal's subconscious self was aware of great vistas

inducing romantic imaginings. Yet the heat, biting through the back of his leather chaqueta, warned him to subdue his pace to the slow rhythm of the immediate universe — lest he find himself on foot in high-heeled boots.

As Temescal's mount shuffled from lope to walk, Juan reined alongside, and glanced back at the red sun. 'Socorro?' he queried.

'But, no.' Temescal shook his head. 'A trick of the llano. Even now the wind runs no higher than a fetlock. It will die upon itself. Then the heat.'

'You know this country, señor?'

Temescal shrugged his shoulders — to lift the heat from his back. 'Are you acquainted with the Devil? You have never seen him, yet you know him, perhaps? So I know the Llano de los Gatos, which, like a cat upon the knee, purrs and works its claws gently into one's skin. Now the cat merely purrs. The claws are sheathed.'

'Yet its breath is hot enough.'

'Si, amigo. And its paw reaches far.' Temescal turned in the saddle and gestured toward the hills whence they had come. 'There sits the cat, its back arched against the sky. The cat watches this gray floor for stray mice. Some ancient humorist must have suffered a pawing and clawing before he dragged himself into a crevice of escape and named the range El Gata. Of a truth it is shaped like the back of a cat — yet the real cat is the sun, the red panther of the desert. I prefer a cooler theme. Do you know the hills of Santa Rosalia, yonder; the hospitable haciendas, the pomegranates, the apples and pears of the higher slopes, and

oranges and figs and wine of the valley? And there, the cool acequias are music, and the shade a prayer of rest. In Santa Rosalia one quickly forgets El Gata and the heat.'

'Ai! But we are here. It is only that which lies behind us which may be forgotten.'

'Or remembered, perhaps?'

'But what good does that do?' queried Juan. 'Why should one bother about that which has happened? That which is going to happen is the best.'

'It depends on whether one saves a little, or spends all.'

Juan thought of money. 'For one who carries much money, you journey in hard places, señor.'

'Like a bandido, eh?' — and Temescal smiled. 'Yet I must pay my way, even here. Set your gaze toward the hills and hold the journey as accomplished. Play with the idea. Imagine yourself in Santa Rosalia, a lieutenant of rurales — say, the rurales of Zacatecas. Imagine me your captain-general. Would such a distinction please you? Or perhaps you would prefer the shepherd's staff and a life of indolence?'

'A man does not think of kissing a woman when his mouth is as dry as a snuffbox,' declared Juan, who thought of La Luz.

'But rather the cool mouth of a jarro of wine out of its earthen cellar in the shady hillside. Of a truth, the tasting of wine is better than the drinking, though we all drink after tasting. Some of us even get drunk. I think repentance prepares the way for future thirst. I never repent.'

'Yet you do not refuse good wine, señor.'

'And I hope that I may never. We have wound a few more miles on the spool. How far is yonder group of palms?'

'I see no palms.'

'Doubtless my eyes are at fault as often as my judgment. I shall study the ears of my horse that I may not again salute a mirage.' And Temescal fixed his attention, seemingly, on his horse's ears.

Within the hour the ears of both horses were pricked rigidly toward a distant rise in the plain, from which sprung a cluster of slender grasses with tufted tops. Nearer, the rise flattened to a rolling sweep of white sand round a group of miniature palm-trees delicately etched against the turquoise sky. Temescal gravely saluted these beneficent sentinels of a desolate outpost by raising his sombrero and bowing. Nor did Juan smile. Instead, he fingered the edge of his own sombrero, almost a convert to Temescal's peculiar creed.

Neither Juan nor Temescal had suffered great fatigue or thirst while traversing the tierra caliente, though, beneath the incessant hammering of the sun, the horses had begun to show signs of distress. Their hitherto sleek coats were ruffled and blotched with dried sweat, their flanks drawn, their eyes dust-rimmed and dull. Having smelled water, however, the horses became excited. Arrived at the oasis, Juan dismounted and held them while Temescal explored the spot, searching for the spring. On the farther side of the oasis he found a meager flow of water, choked by sand and litter. He cleaned out the spring that the horses might drink freely. Meanwhile, the thirsty animals fretted, tossed their heads, stamped impatiently. They could not un-

derstand the restraint. Temescal's horse, pulling back on the reins suddenly, cut his mouth with the heavy spade-bit. Rearing and plunging backward into a tangle of dried palm-fronds, its hind feet broke through the withered mat. Juan, clinging to the reins, was jerked from his balance. One of the horse's wildly pawing forefeet flashed down and struck him on the head. Juan collapsed like an empty glove.

Free, the horses swung round to where Temescal knelt, cleaning out the spring. He caught them, and allowed them to drink. Tethering them to a palm, he hastened round to the eastern side of the oasis. He found Juan face-down amid a litter of fronds.

Temescal knelt and examined his stricken companion. 'And so, little soldier?' he murmured as he carried Juan to the spring. He gave Juan a little wine, yet the young soldado did not recover consciousness.

Philosophically Temescal accepted the situation. He again allowed the horses to drink, stripped off saddles and bridles and tethered them farther apart, and fed them grain in the morrals. Then he took off his boots, chaqueta and shirt, and sat with his back against a palm-trunk, watching his companion. Juan's face was ghastly yellow, his eyes ringed with purple shadows.

Slowly the silhouettes of the tall palms drew around and lengthened. The stagnant heat pressed hard. Temescal's head nodded. He blinked away the haze in which Juan's face had become a mere pallid blur. Rising, he took the morrals from the horses. For a minute or so Temescal stood gazing out across the glaring emptiness. A wide shadow flicked past on the white sand. He

glanced up. A vulture hung circling just above the tops of the palms.

'But, no!' he cried. 'Not my companion — and not here!'

Stooping, he drew his rifle from the scabbard. The gun leapt to his shoulder like the hand of a friend to a friend. The muzzle swept in a brief arc. The echo of the shot snarled out into space. The circling vulture collapsed as though it had dashed against a cliff. Turning over and over, it splashed through the spreading green top of a gigantic palm and crashed down upon the ground.

'My eyesight is improving,' declared Temescal as he sheathed the rifle.

Juan raised his hand and gestured feebly.

CHAPTER XVIII

UNABLE to continue the journey because of Juan's condition, Temescal wasted no effort in combating the inevitable, conserving his energy against the heat, which seemed to increase with the setting of the sun. All his philosophy, his sense of humor, the vigor of his will, evaporated, leaving but the husks of habit as evidence that he was a living animal and not a stone or a dead yucca-stalk. Nor could he, between the intervals of giving Juan water and bathing his own chest and shoulders, amuse himself by introspection and communion with his soul. He was neither asleep nor fully awake. Juan's occasional request for water was a welcome distraction.

Slowly Temescal climbed, as it were, out of the black pit of the stagnant night, relieved when the steely edge of dawn slipped between the earth and the sky, and the first thin wedge of gold pried the cover of dusk from the slumbering world.

He watered the horses, made a fire, drank black coffee. Unable to sleep at night, he now slept heavily. About noon he arose, sweltering. Some instinct urged him to activity. He strode out across the white sand to the rise east of the oasis, where the sting of the sun's dry heat was a momentary stimulant. Far out on the eastern desert lay a mirage, a wide, blue lake, edged with palms, its serene surface mirroring a shadowy mountain range.

'It is like the lagoon of Ramora,' reflected Temescal, 'but never a white burro and three folk wading knee-deep in the phantom water!'

He closed his eyes, covered them with his hand. When he again glanced at the mirage, the phantom travelers seemed to be nearer its palm-fringed shore. 'Of a truth, my brain is touched by the sun! The Red Panther plays with my reason.'

Stubbornly disregarding the mirage, Temescal returned to the oasis. Juan, on hands and knees, was crawling toward the saddles. Temescal paused. Reaching the saddles, Juan found the bottle of white wine and drank greedily. He crawled back to the spring and lay with his arms outflung, seemingly in a stupor. Temescal secured the firearms and hid them. Juan's delirium might take an aggressive turn.

As for himself? Temescal shook his head. A mirage was nothing new to him. But a white burro wading across the serene blue emptiness of a phantom lagoon! For perhaps an hour, while Juan lay motionless, Temescal pondered the illusion. The intense heat warred against his inclination to rise and once more view the mirage. Finally curiosity overcame his lassitude. He went out to the ridge. The mirage had vanished. Yet the white burro still persisted, plodding across the gray emptiness. With him journeyed three figures, plainly discernible as they topped a low rise, for an instant silhouetted against the eastern sky.

'Yet nothing is impossible,' declared Temescal, now assured beyond all doubt that those who journeyed toward the oasis were Alejandro and his family. So, patient upon his little hill, Temescal waited to meet

those who were so soon to become his guests, his charges, and his companions in adventuring. Was he irritated or distressed by this added burden of responsibility? Did he frown upon the absurdity of this awkward circumstance? Was he bitter toward the fling of Fate that would make him cicerone, provider, protector, and captain of this rural and impoverished cavalcade? Did he, who held the confidence of potentates and whose lifted finger could command ten thousand armed horsemen to his bidding, regret this additional interruption to his plan and purpose? Not so! He was never more generously disposed than at the moment. Of this there could be no more convincing proof than his utterance as he rubbed his unshaven chin reflectively: 'Sacaton! But I forgot to shave this morning — and there is a lady approaching.'

Thus great men are never greater than when they are themselves.

Pepito, leading the white burro, was first to observe the figure of a man, standing straight and immobile upon a distant ridge of sand. Yet it was La Luz who named the figure 'Temescal.' Alejandro, plodding wearily behind her, followed her gesture with his eyes. He breathed the name, echoed it in his mind, and felt its potency as it had been a draught of cool wine.

'We escape!' he murmured. 'We have a friend.'

At the foot of the low, sandy hill, the travelers stopped. Instantly extreme fatigue was evident in every line of their bodies.

'Welcome!' cried Temescal, as though receiving them upon the threshold of a palace.

Pepito, Alejandro, and La Luz gazed up at him, their

weary eyes suddenly lighted with a radiance akin to that in the eyes of the forlorn who behold the image of a saving deity. In three gigantic strides Temescal was among them. The white burro nosed his arm. Alejandro grasped Temescal and embraced him. Pepito, upon his knees, brushed the dust from Temescal's boots with his battered hat. Only La Luz remained aloof, her white teeth pressed against her lower lip. Yet her eyes were Temescal's. She wondered why Juan had not come to meet them.

As he dusted Temescal's boots, Pepito babbled of bandits, of slaughtered sheep, of the guitarra, until Alejandro silenced him.

Moving toward the oasis, Temescal gave his arm to Alejandro with a sprightly 'May I show you the way to my casa, señor?'

And, 'Juan has suffered an accident,' explained Temescal as they arrived at the spring. 'He sleeps. Thus we have been delayed, most fortunately, by his misfortune.'

While Pepito unpacked the burro and La Luz made her father comfortable with a sarape spread in the shade, Temescal gave his attention to Juan, who was presently revived from his lethargy and acknowledged the presence of Alejandro and his family with an oath of astonishment.

'The soldier has returned,' observed Temescal. 'He is weak, and may not travel immediately, but his mind has cleared. So, Señor Alejandro, you have brought good fortune to us.'

'Yet you may not say so when I tell you why we are here,' said Alejandro. Incensed by the outrage to his

flocks and home, the shepherd recounted the vivid happenings of the past few days.

'And I think it is that we bring misfortune,' he concluded pessimistically. 'Even now the ladrones follow us. That we have escaped them is a miracle. That we shall escape them again seems impossible. We are fordone. And were we not, what could we do against so many?'

'Much,' said Temescal — 'that they may not anticipate. Rest, until the sun is below the mountains. Meanwhile, I will snatch a plan from the sky.'

CHAPTER XIX

THROUGHOUT the long hot hours of the afternoon, Alejandro, La Luz, and Juan slept. Meanwhile, Temescal and Pepito busied themselves arranging for the departure at sundown. The horses were fed, saddled, and allowed to drink. Pepito prepared food for the evening meal, while Temescal divided Alejandro's provisions into three portions, disposing of all the remaining effects by burying them in the heart of the oasis and cleverly thatching the hollow in such a manner that the cache could never be discovered save by sheer accident. Returning to the spring, he found La Luz and Juan conversing quietly, the young soldier apparently having recovered sufficiently to sit with his back against a palm-trunk and reiterate trembling vows of admiration and fidelity. Temescal roused Alejandro and talked with him apart from the others.

'I have buried your belongings in the oasis and disguised the cache completely,' declared Temescal.

'But, señor —!'

'That the burro may be used to better advantage,' continued Temescal. 'I have also concealed the packsaddle, and replaced it with a blanket. You will ride the burro, Señor Alejandro. Juan will ride his horse. Pepito is tireless — filled with a mad energy that knows no fatigue. He will walk. My horse will carry double.'

'But my silver crucifix, the clock, my flagon —'

'And La Luz?'

'Ai! La Luz! There is no argument. I am ungrateful,

and a fool. You shame me by your wisdom, Don Ricardo.'

'Peanuts! Eat. Drink a little wine. Pray, if you will, but sharpen a stick and prod the burro if he lags. Should mischance separate us before we reach the hills, here is a note which you will carry to Captain José Hermanos of the Zacatecas rurales. You will find him either in San Domingo or Santa Rosalia. He will see to your welfare. Return to the spring and make ready to depart.'

Brusquely Temescal turned and strode to the ridge east of the oasis. He could discern, far down the long sunset reaches, the occasional twinkle of metal and of movement. 'They will arrive two hours behind the sun,' he muttered. 'Were Juan himself, and I had two more as loyal, we could subtract enough from twenty to teach the dogs practical arithmetic. As it is, I can but mark minus on the sand. Let them read the sign and howl. The moon will take no offense.'

Stimulated by additional responsibility, by the presence of La Luz, by the realization that his companion Juan had recovered from his stupor, Temescal, having eaten and warmed his imagination with a thimbleful of white wine, gathered his retainers together and, like a true patron, fathered the exodus with tact, encouragement, and not-to-be-gainsaid decision. When Alejandro intimated that he could carry some of his buried belongings while riding the burro, Temescal seemed to have become suddenly deaf. When Juan, from the dizzy eminence of his saddle — he was still weak from loss of blood and shock — suggested that La Luz mount behind him, Temescal squashed the suggestion.

'I have arranged. You are too weak to more than

hold yourself in the saddle. Pepito will walk beside your horse. If you decide to fall off, do not forget which side he is on. It may save your head.'

They moved slowly from the deep shadows of the oasis out into the hot, velvet dusk of the starlit desert. Alejandro, a fantastic shape on the white burro, Juan following, with Pepito at his stirrup, and Temescal's horse carrying double.

The white burro shuffled across the sand briskly, possibly because Alejandro had resorted to prayer, more probably because he employed Temescal's suggestion, a sharpened stick. Pepito, sullen because he could not walk beside Temescal instead of beside Juan, wished that the young lieutenant would fall off his horse, on the far side, and break his neck, and thus cease to be an encumbrance to the expedition. Only fear of Temescal's wrath restrained Pepito from slyly jabbing the horse in the stomach and causing an accident. Great churchmen have entertained temptations quite as sanguinary.

La Luz, her hand upon Temescal's shoulder, as she sat sideways behind him, gave to the motion of the plodding horse like a young alder in the breeze. In the exultation inspired by the desert night, their strange journey, and the nearness of Don Ricardo, she forgot for a while the abandoned home, the green meadow, the slaughtered sheep, and even the reason for their flight. And because he did not speak, she longed to hear his voice. If she bit her pretty red lip and frowned petulantly, how could his sturdy back realize it?

Finally she found something to say. 'Do your eyes still trouble you, señor?' she asked.

Had Don Ricardo been pondering problems of state

or finance or war, politics, or social economy, that his rein-hand came up so suddenly and his horse stopped? Not so. Rather, because of the strange exultation inspired by the desert night, their journey, and above all by the nearness of La Luz, he had forgotten all such inconsequential matters. Because she had not spoken, he had longed to hear her voice. And, perversely, because La Luz was behind him, he longed to behold her face. But now that she had spoken — and solicitously!

With an utterance rich and altogether convincing, he acknowledged her question. 'Only, señorita, because they are not in the back of my head!'

'The horse has stopped,' said La Luz, a bit startled by Temescal's ponderous compliment.

'Quite so. My heart, however, has begun to beat again. Are you comfortable?'

'Ah, señor! Can't you see that I am?'

'No!' And Temescal's 'no' rolled from his chest like the reverberation of drums, challenging, portentous. La Luz quivered with delight. Here, beneath the touch of her hand, was the cavalier of the green meadow, who sang one's soul into ecstasy, who drank regally, yet rose in the morning with sunshine in his eyes, and who was courteous to humble folk.

'Don Ricardo —' breathed La Luz, and hesitated.

Temescal urged his horse along again. Presently he was close to the vague figures of Juan and Pepito.

'How is it with you, compadre?' he called.

'Well enough,' replied Juan. 'I need no one to hold me in the saddle.'

'So?' murmured Temescal.

La Luz laughed softly. 'But I shall walk beside him for a while,' she said.

'You will not!' declared Temescal. 'If my comrade needs assistance, he will not deny me the privilege.' And Temescal glanced over his shoulder, possibly to emphasize his word. He saw the edge of a woven straw sombrero — a cheap sombrero such as peons wear — yet then and there it became a halo, an arcadian penumbra, and beneath it the downcast eyes of La Luz.

'Si, señor,' she murmured obediently.

Temescal said 'Ahem!' expressively. 'Well, that matter is settled.'

Past clumps of ghostly cactus and deep-shadowed rocks, down smooth, shadowless levels of vanished lakes, across low ridges rounded by the winds, along crisp-sounding flats of scattered gravel, yet ever bearing west, they made their slow way, the white burro's long ears thrust forward into the darkness, and Alejandro's gaze fixed upon the guiding star. Gaining confidence because of the befriending night and his companions, the shepherd became genial toward himself, expanding, in imagination, to the full stature of a man, by choice a martial figure mounted upon a snow-white charger, leading a vanquished but unconquered host toward a far, fair sanctuary of pastoral quietude. Yet the bobbing ears of the white burro persistently emphasized the actual, until Alejandro, with querulous impatience, signified his return to earth by prodding the animal with the sharpened stick. 'There is little difference between us,' he remarked, 'save that you have the longer ears.'

Feeling a tug at his sleeve, Temescal turned, his gaze directed by the outstretched arm of La Luz. Far back

in the heart of the night he beheld a tiny flame that, flickering, cast a faint crimson glow on the tops of the distant palms. He nodded and touched his finger to his lips. 'It is my business to extinguish all such fires in Mexico.'

Puzzled, La Luz was silent. Her father had told her that Don Ricardo was a great man — one who had many guns at his command. Yet he seemed not too great to ignore the afflicted, the distressed, the destitute. La Luz thought of the infant Temescalita, toward whom she had felt a strange, unaccountable jealousy. As they journeyed through the still night, La Luz explored chance byways of imagination, yet ever aware that her hand rested on Temescal's shoulder. Finally, being a healthy young animal, La Luz drifted to sleep, her head against Temescal's broad back. Her hand slipped from his shoulder. As the horse crossed a stretch of rough ground, La Luz lost her balance, but lithely caught herself as she slipped, instantly awake as her feet touched the ground.

Temescal reined up sharply. Leaning down, he swept his arm around her and drew her up. 'If you must sleep,' he said with affected sternness, 'here is your place.'

'You are a very strong man, señor,' breathed La Luz. 'Yet here, in your arms, I should tire you.'

'Your face is like a golden flower in the dusk,' murmured Temescal. 'Of such fragrance I drink sparingly. Thus do I seal the chalice. La Luz, my golden one, there is no to-morrow. All is in this hour.'

To La Luz came happiness undreamed, a magic awakening. Her dark eyes were dimmed with a mist of

tears. This Temescal was no longer a stranger, inexplicable in his attitudes, his moods, his sprightly pleasantries. This man was, simply, Temescal.

'If you would sleep,' he whispered.

'But, no. I shall ride behind you. I shall put my arms around you, señor, that I may not fall.'

'Not around me, "señor," but around —

'Mio Ricardo!' murmured La Luz. Swiftly she drew his head down, fiercely she pressed her mouth against his mouth. Then she slipped from his arms, stood at his stirrup, which he made empty that she might mount behind him.

Again upon their way, La Luz dreamily content with the silent companionship of Temescal, they drew toward the sound of voices. Just before Temescal came up with the others, who had halted, La Luz leaned forward: 'For all men, save one, I have the little knife in my garter.'

'Quite so,' said Temescal.

Alejandro's guiding star had thoughtlessly descended behind the mountains of the west. Juan, Pepito, and the shepherd were arguing as to which way to proceed, each of a different mind, yet each positive that he was correct.

Thenceforth they journeyed steadily until, an hour before dawn, Juan toppled from the saddle, falling, most fortunately, against Pepito, who instinctively caught him and instantly regretted having done so.

'The sick one is now dead!' cried Pepito enthusiastically, as they gathered round the unconscious Juan. 'He said if he died suddenly, I was to have his horse and his gun and his money.'

'He has fainted from weariness,' said Temescal, kneeling and raising Juan's head. 'The wine, señorita, is in my saddle-bags.'

Presently Juan was revived sufficiently to declare that he could continue the journey.

'Good!' said Temescal. 'We are not far from the hills. The dawn wind is awake. Set your courage against another hour of travel, and we shall be among our friends, the trees.'

The quickened energy of the horses, the slope of the land, the washes of gravel and scattered rock assured the travelers that they were near the foothills. And, as though to inspire the weary adventurers to a last, gallant effort, the dawn came swiftly, seeming to lift the great Santa Rosalia range up out of nothingness, its rugged lower battlements filmed with a haze of amethyst. Green above the lower slopes of the range, the timberlands ran north and south, winding away into invisibility.

'Sanctuary!' cried Alejandro, his voice breaking.

With a business-like air, the white burro made directly for a clump of foliage set in the narrow clasp of a rocky defile. Topography inspired him only when it hinted of water and grass. The clump of foliage presently became a group of stalwart trees shading a pool. A trail, evidently made by deer or mountain sheep, led on up into the shadows of the morning hillside.

The horses and burro were watered and fed. Pepito made a fire, and the family ate a scanty breakfast, following which Alejandro immediately lay down to sleep.

La Luz was cleaning their few utensils when Temescal gestured to her. She rose and came to him. Her gaze

followed his out across the morning desert. Of a color with the desert, yet separated from it by movement, a sinister, crawling thing dragged itself along the smooth gray floor. The sunlight struck occasional faint flashes from bandolier and belt, from concha and carbine.

'The bandidos!' whispered La Luz. 'They did not camp at the Place of Palms.'

'I do not think they follow us so much as that they are followed. For so large a company, they move swiftly. Let your father sleep until the burro is again packed. You must captain a new plan, my golden one.'

When the horses had been saddled and the burro again packed, La Luz awakened her father. To his startled questioning, Temescal raised a silencing hand.

'We are followed closely. Waste no time in words. Make ready to depart. Of you, señor, I shall require the pair of new shoes which you have salvaged for a more devout use. You will have to be content for a while with the old ones that you wear. And of you, Juan, I shall require your carbine and bandolier. You may retain your pistol. Of you, La Luz, I ask nothing but fidelity to my purpose — which is to assure the safety of yourself, your good father, and my friend Juan. You will take my horse, señorita. Noon should find you on the crest of the range. Somewhere along the foothills of the western slope is the town of Santa Rosalia. I have given a note to you, Señor Alejandro, which you will deliver to one there who will receive you hospitably. I have use for the boy, Pepito. We shall follow as we can.'

'But why not journey with us, Don Ricardo?'

Temescal pulled off his boots. 'The shoes!' he demanded. Then, to La Luz: 'I shall feel honored, seño-

rita, if you will wear my boots until such time as I may reclaim them. Here, on foot among the rocks, they would be a hindrance to me.'

'Si, señor.' The dark eyes of La Luz were exceedingly bright as she realized Temescal's intent, which was to remain and check the progress of the bandits by harrying them from the vantage of concealing rock or ledge or protecting tree-trunk. Her man could do no less.

Juan, however, protested that, alone and on foot, Temescal ran serious risk. Alejandro implored Temescal to reconsider and flee with them.

'My patience is raveled to nopal strands by these outlaws,' declared Temescal. 'I shall braid a whip and teach them a custom of the penitentes. My farewell is said. Yet a word with you, Señor Alejandro.'

A few paces aside, Temescal stripped off his money-belt and gave it to the shepherd. 'Use what you need, freely. And, finding Captain José Hermanos, send him to me here with a knowledge of that which detains me. Go with God, my friend.'

CHAPTER XX

WHILE Temescal filled a canteen at the pool, Alejandro, Juan, and La Luz rode slowly up the wild trail leading toward the shadowy timberlands. And with them, as Temescal was wont to say in the calm perspective of after years, went most of his equipment, all his money, and half his heart. The other half, it would seem, he retained for a stern, immediate purpose. The ragged outlaws of Cabazon, though still distant, were steadily approaching the foothills.

There was too much of the poet, the philosopher, the humanitarian in Temescal's peculiar cosmos for him to love battle for its own sake. In fact, his compassion and generosity had more than once all but ended his earthly activities. That, upon occasion, he realized the inevitable necessity for combat is evident even in these intimate, arcadian annals. It is more superlatively evident in the conventional record of his official performances, emblazoned upon an especially sanguinary page of history, which, with strange inaccuracy, accounts him as dead.

It is true that when the imperious, challenging trumpets of his land shout 'Temescal!' he does not appear. Though he hear their searching echoes murmur his name in faltering cadences among the farthest hills, he is silent. When the poor, the destitute, the harassed, fearful that even their stark walls will betray them, whisper in prayer, 'Return, oh, Temescal!' they but

conjure a phantom from the shadows of memory, at most a hope forlorn to cheat their troubled eyes. And perhaps it is as well. There are enough torches abroad in the land.'

When La Luz, without protest, argument, or trace of hesitation, mounted his horse and turned to the upland trail, Temescal was so pleased with her calm obedience that he could not quite contain himself.

'There,' he said as he immersed the canteen in the cool mountain water, 'goes a *woman.*'

Bubbles gurgled up from the mouth of the submerged canteen — bubbles which seemed to chuckle at his somewhat trite observation. Yet Temescal's resonant intonation, the caressing eloquence of his utterance, the history-defying, whole-hearted emphasis of the word 'woman,' was not alone a lyric tribute to La Luz the shepherd's daughter, but a veritable melody of adoration — a song that would have enthralled the unsophisticated Eve, charmed unblushing Aphrodite from her morning bath, suffused the broad white brow of ardent Sappho with rose envy.

However, Temescal had little time to revel in the echoes of his poetic intensity. He rose briskly, slung the canteen across his shoulder. 'There goes a woman!' he had said. 'And here goes nothing!' he said, as he summoned Pepito and hastened along the gravelly slope of the foothills. Hazard always inclined Temescal toward humor. Delighting in his own poetic outbursts, he as often laughed at them.

Emerging from an arroyo farther up the rocky slope, they concealed themselves behind a huge cube of granite. Temescal took off his chaqueta and folded it care-

fully. He dropped a handful of cartridges into his upturned sombrero, loosened his shirt-collar, and drank from the canteen. 'And now,' he said — he was a master of continuity — 'we shall get to business. Pepito, this carbine is operated thus. Here are the cartridges. I have unloaded the magazine. Now I reload it.' He gave the carbine to the youth. 'Remember,' he said sternly, 'you will shoot at ladrones, not at gentlemen engrossed in the intricacies of shaving themselves.'

Pepito grasped the carbine, delighted with the weapon, and the obvious possibilities approaching.

'Yonder ride the outlaws who slaughtered your sheep and ravaged your home,' declared Temescal. 'That your family may not be overtaken, we remain here to entertain the bandits. If I should be hit, take to the hills. Follow the tracks of your family. Yet, if we have the good fortune to come out of this enterprise unscathed, I shall make you my mozo for life.'

Surprise, affection, gratitude transfigured Pepito's homely face until it glowed with the fanatic rapture of a martyr visioning the divine. 'I am a good boy, señor! I am strong! I will fight for you —'

'You are a rotten shot. Do not fire at anything unless I tell you to do so. Keep in front of me. I don't want to get it in the back.'

Arriving at the pool below, the bandidos watered their horses, made camp, and cooked meat. Watching them, Pepito trembled with excitement and suspense. Was the great one afraid to shoot? Many could be killed, and easily. Perhaps the great one would wait until the ladrones were asleep and then steal nearer and kill them all.

Temescal, however, seemed content with observing the raiders. He knew that these men, heavily armed and not in uniform, were plunderers, murderers; undoubtedly those who had made the infant Temescalita an orphan, had infested Santuario, and later had discovered and ravaged Alejandro's hermitage. And among them was one, a broad, thick, and commanding figure, whom Temescal could have sworn was the Thief of Cabazon himself. Yet he hesitated to fire upon them. From his vantage of concealment, and in the tumult of their surprise, he could snuff out a half-score of lives before they could entrench themselves.

The morning sun, exploring nook and crevice, blazed upon the scarred brown cliffs above, the graveled foothill slopes, the shimmering desert below. Clustered in the shade near the pool, the bandidos squatted, eating their scanty breakfast. A sentinel stood guard over the horses, which had not been unsaddled. Temescal glanced up at the sun, then at the shadow cast by the granite cube. The increasing heat rebounded from the tumbled rock and shale of the hillside. Pepito wondered why Temescal did not kill these men. He ardently desired to see men killed, to see the great one wage war against those who had slaughtered the sheep, driven Alejandro and La Luz from their home, and possessed themselves of the beautiful guitarra. Yet Temescal sat with his back against the granite cube, seemingly indifferent to a providential opportunity.

Temescal's eyes were closed. It is possible, though not probable, that he slept. Perhaps he had but retired within himself to re-create the vision of a face like a

golden flower in the dusk. Below, the bandidos lay stretched in the shade, asleep.

An hour, two hours — and Pepito roused Temescal.

'Señor!' he whispered, 'they make ready to go.'

Temescal's eyes unclosed calmly. He glanced at the shadow of the rock, at the camp of the bandits. 'Time has chosen,' he declared somewhat regretfully. He moistened his handkerchief and bathed his eyes. 'Stay where you are until I need you,' he told Pepito. Temescal picked up his rifle.

The sharp report snarled down the hillside, its ragged echoes hurtling along the cliffs above. In the distant camp a horseman weaved in the saddle, toppled, and slid slowly to the ground. 'Temescalita!' murmured Temescal. His hand shot forward and back. Another shot barked above the tumult and clamor round the pool. And another horseman, about to mount, suddenly seemed to change his mind. He let go the horse and pitched forward on his face. 'The mother of Temescalita!' murmured Temescal. Again the report of his rifle crashed into shivering echoes. One of the ladrones, spurring out toward the desert, fell forward on the neck of his horse. 'Temescalita's father was kindly and industrious,' murmured Temescal. A bullet buzzed up from the distant camp and splashed against the face of the granite cube.

'The quail have scattered to cover, but they will come together again,' said Temescal. 'We shall occupy a higher position. Crawl back into the arroyo and make your way up the hill. I shall follow, presently.'

'But, señor, I will stay! I am not afraid —'

'Go!' thundered Temescal. As he spoke something whistled across the top of the granite cube, spattering stinging fragments in the herd-boy's face. Pepito dropped to his hands and knees and crawled toward the brink of the arroyo.

CHAPTER XXI

HAD the rifle-fire from above been of more volume, even though less disconcertingly accurate, undoubtedly the bandits would have taken to the desert and spurred a hasty and final retreat south. Yet the most stupid among them realized they were not attacked by the rurales, who would have followed their advantage of surprise with a swift and merciless assault.

As it was, the outlaws broke for cover among the foothill ridges, each man for himself, the riderless horses too jaded to do more than drift together and mill slowly round the flat below the spring.

From their hastily assumed concealments the outlaws exchanged oathful opinions as to the identity of the unseen marksman. Their chief, the Thief of Cabazon, the real, the infamous Temescal, shrewdly aware that an excellent and daring marksman commanded the approach to the only pass across the range within thirty or forty miles, directed his followers to scatter up the slope and surround the distant granite cube which concealed their enemy. His followers, however, remained strangely silent and inactive. The Thief of Cabazon immediately enhanced his suggestion with an interesting postscript: 'A hundred pesos to the man who brings me his ears.'

The proffered reward inspired the ladrones to sudden and concentrated action. Ignoring the mute significance of the three separate, huddled shapes on the sand below, the bandits crawled from rock to rock up the hillside, working as a ragged unit, yet each viciously deter-

mined to force the solitary rifleman from his entrenchment, make the kill, and exchange a mere pair of ears for a hundred silver pesos. Although their hidden enemy had cost them three fighting men, the reward seemed munificent. Less had been offered and earned for a General, complete.

Did Temescal anticipate an attempt to surround him when he sent Pepito farther up the mountain-side? One might assume that in doing so he merely wished to test the alertness of the bandits, to ascertain whether or not a rifle commanded the more or less open stretch between his stronghold and the brink of the arroyo. Or one might more generously conclude that Temescal wished to assure himself of Pepito's safety before he himself gave up the keystone of the situation. Knowing Temescal, it is difficult to deny him credit for either astuteness or unselfishness. Yet it is only fair to his native integrity that the immovable facts be inspected before burdening him with more glory than he could comfortably bear.

Once, when questioned as to why he did not immediately retreat with Pepito while — as the questioner put it — the retreating was good, Temescal shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands politely, convincingly, and regarded the toe of his highly polished boot. 'I would be loved or hated for that which I am, and not for that which I might so easily affect,' he declared. 'I shall not be an oracle of convenience for those who deal too carelessly in eulogies! Nor shall I ingratiate myself with Fame by affirming an excellence possessed, yet which Fame may deny me. If the intuitions of my friends are at fault, it is not my desire or my business to adjust them.'

It is possible that Temescal, like a famous prototype, hereby 'contrived an evasion.' However, one might as well let the tail go with the hide, and pocket the peso without biting it.

The facts, however, are undisguised.

Temescal refrained from shooting down the exposed and helpless horses of the bandits.

He withheld his fire while the bandits scurried to shelter, although he was accounted a good wing-shot.

Following the disappearance of his enemies, one of their number ventured out on the flat below the spring and deliberately hazed the horses toward the foothills, while nothing emanated from Temescal's lone citadel of defiance save an eloquent and impressive silence.

Hot noon glared down upon the wooded mountainside, the bleak brown lower slopes strewn with tumbled rock, the long, smooth sweep of pebble-dotted benchland, imperceptibly merging with the wide gray barrens of the desert floor.

It is true that Temescal donned his chaqueta, not, however, with immediate retreat in mind, but to protect his back and shoulders from the blistering sun. The granite cube now stood naked, shadowless.

He slipped the unused cartridges back into his belt-loops and put on his sombrero. His mind, so recently active in planning and performing, became less energetic in the stagnant heat, the silence, the apparent cessation of hostilities. And then it was that intuition, so easily frightened from a task by logic and its myrmidons, tiptoed up to Temescal, and whispering advised him to make the most of his present vantage.

Even more portentous was the instant shot which

reverberated in the resounding woodlands above, as Pepito, crouching behind a tree-trunk, hugged the stock of his carbine to his cheek and cut loose at a slinking figure obviously stalking the unwary Temescal.

'Idiot!' snorted Temescal. 'I had them burrowing for shelter. Now he has stirred them up again!'

Snatching up his rifle, he made a crouching dash for the brink of the arroyo. Nor did he stand upon the order of the topography, but, slipping and sliding, descended in a dusty avalanche of loosened earth and clattering stones. Leaping from rock to rock, trotting up the occasional sandy stretches, and finally swinging with Pepito's tracks up and out upon a gentle slope shaded by stately trees, he discovered the shepherd boy dancing an impromptu tarantella on his long-suffering hat, and gesticulating wildly. Pepito ceased as he saw Temescal, ran to him, and grasped his sleeve.

'There!' he whispered tensely, pointing far down the hillside; 'he kicks, but it is that he will not get up again.'

'Quite so,' said Temescal, instantly realizing his recent danger, Pepito's fortunate accuracy of aim, and the disruption of his plans. Amply screened by the noble rotundity of a great cypress, Temescal strove to regain his breath. He gestured toward the carbine in Pepito's hand. 'You have done me a service, although you disobeyed me. You now have my permission to use the gun when necessity demands.'

'I do not waste the cartridges,' said Pepito, pointing proudly toward the distant evidence. 'I saw him walking thus' — Pepito imitated a crouching figure — 'and watching the rock where you were hidden. In here, señor' — and the shepherd boy touched his chest — 'a

voice said, "kill the thief who slaughtered your sheep!" It was your voice, señor! I am a good boy. I made him kick. Perhaps very soon I will make another one kick.'

'Possibly.' Temescal was still a bit short of breath. 'Yet I had planned otherwise.'

'Perhaps it is that we go now, quick. There are many trees. We will not be seen.'

Temescal was not altogether displeased with the suggestion. Henceforth the ladrones would proceed with extreme caution, especially when traversing the thickly timbered reaches of the higher country. Already Alejandro, Juan, and La Luz would have gained the western slope of the range, with the visible promise of safety in the valley of Santa Rosalia. Moreover, Temescal ardently desired to escape from the secluding canopy of the shadowy forest, which, obstructing his view of free spaces and the rounding sky, strangely oppressed and subdued him.

Turning to reconnoiter the upper slope before he ventured from his sheltering tree, Temescal's gaze was defeated by the blank wall of a cliff, hitherto unnoticed. Apparently this unanticipated barrier ran east and west for a considerable distance. The face of the cliff was scarred by a narrow ledge, and above the ledge another, and still another. The sun struck a path of gold down through an opening in the towering forest. The trunks of the trees glowed as though alive with creeping fire.

Temescal's quick eye caught the movement of a shadow along the cliff. A ragged figure was crawling along the lower ledge, peering down . . . Temescal's rifle swung to his shoulder and he fired, even as the bandido discovered and fired at him. The shots crashed

together, their shouting echoes rolling along the mountain-side. With outflung arms the bandido plunged down through the swishing branches and rolled almost to Temescal's feet. Pepito, watching the lower hillside, jumped round, chattering like a startled ape.

The bandit was not dead, yet he had not far to go.

Temescal raised the stricken outlaw's head. 'Who sent you?' he demanded.

'Temescal.'

'The Thief of Cabazon?'

'Si,' whispered the dying outlaw. 'He will give a hundred pesos for your ears.' The blue lips grinned hideously. The nerveless jaw dropped.

'So?' murmured Temescal. 'Come, muchacho, let us save our ears.'

With Pepito trotting ahead, they reached the cliff, moved swiftly from ledge to ledge, until they were above the tops of the trees, when shot after shot barked up from the hillside below. Leaden wasps buzzed and spattered round them as they ran. Temescal's somber mood had vanished. His face shone with a strange ecstatic radiance. He cried encouragement to Pepito, although the frightened herd-boy had already outdistanced him along the narrow ledges. A shot ripped Temescal's sleeve from wrist to shoulder.

On the topmost ledge, from which he could view the long sweep of the mountain-side below, Temescal paused, sadly out of breath. He took off his sombrero, wiped his forehead. The pause was a rest, and a perilous recreation. Immediately he became the target for an especially lively fusillade, which spread silvery blotches on the face of the cliff, in front of him, behind him, above

him. He leaned forward and fled up the trail. He stopped. A bullet smacked against the cliff not six inches in front of him. Another step and he would have stopped the bullet. His most fortunate pause was due to his having caught sight of a track in the shale-dust — the faint imprint of a high-heeled boot. 'Sacaton!' breathed Temescal. And then, 'La Luz!' Evidently La Luz, to save the weary horse, had led it up the steep ascent. Temescal's heart skipped a beat, then resumed its valiant pounding at his ribs. The pulse of his spirit quickened. Unconsciously he straightened to his full height. A bullet whined and spattered on the rock close to his head. 'Not yet!' he said, and with his finger drew a cross on the silver blotch that had all but been his final monogram. Crouching, he strode swiftly along the ledge.

Reaching the final level of the crest, Temescal turned and gazed across the magic distances. The light in his eyes danced like sunshine on rippling water. And here he launched a stentorian challenge which rolled out from the height and resounded down the mountain like the tolling of a great bell — 'Tem-es-cal!' Far-flung, the tone sang true, even beyond the volume of its sound, slowly diminishing. The awakened echoes retold the name in quick, rude clamoring, until, from some distant hollow, came the faint and final syllable, muffled like the voice of one who mocks behind his hand.

One might surmise that Temescal's sudden change of mood and his succeeding outburst were inspired by a lofty disdain, or by contempt, or the excitement of escape; or, again, that, once above the oppressing shadowy canopy of the forest, he had thus lifted his heart to the sun and his voice to the heavens. Not so.

Coming upon the footprint of La Luz, he had stopped. Starting forward again, he had disconcerted the rifles that had anticipated his continued progress, holding their fire the least bit ahead of him. An accident of Providence had woven the various threads of circumstance into a garment of salvation. This accident of Providence was the footprint of La Luz. And realizing this — after he was well out of rifle-shot — Temescal had flung his melodious defiance, not merely to a band of ragged outlaws, but to the four winds of heaven, to Fate itself.

CHAPTER XXII

PAUSING only long enough to assure himself that Temescal was following, Pepito had turned from the rim of the cliff and set off at a brisk trot, dodging in and out among the now dwarfed and twisted cypresses that writhed and whimpered in the wind of the height. No snarling, importunate bullets now nipped at his heels or snapped at the fluttering folds of his blouse, yet he maintained a deliberate pace until he had disappeared beyond the low, curving skyline of the crest. Nor was his apparent haste inspired by the thought of escape, so much as by the tracks of shod horses—occasional fresh scars upon the rounded rocks. Below the crest, along its wooded, western slope, Pepito discovered the unmistakable hoofprints of the burro. Pepito 'followed the tracks of his family.'

To Temescal, however, the abrupt level of the cliff edge was somewhat like the final sentence of a lengthy and involved paragraph, wherein the period is welcome, the succeeding space restful to the physical eye, even though the mind be perturbed by an altogether unanticipated climax.

Pepito had vanished.

Temescal was surprised, puzzled, irritated. His dignity, swelled by a high pulse, was affronted by that which he termed a desertion. Pepito should have been there, on the mountain-top, because Temescal had not imagined that he would be anywhere else.

Accustomed to exacting obedience by sheer personal-

ity, accustomed to commanding men who were keen and quick to anticipate his wishes, Temescal resented the shepherd boy's dereliction even while he reproved himself for losing patience with the lad. A slight trembling of the legs influenced Temescal to sit down and rest. His breathing became more measured. Yet echoes of his resentment still rumbled and grumbled in his chest, like the muffled booming of retreating thunder. 'He was scared to death, and he stampeded!' declared Temescal. 'Yes! My logic is sound, yet despicable, even though he has decamped with our precious sack of goat's meat and bread.'

His back against a sheltering rock, his arms folded and his legs crossed, Temescal gazed down upon the wide valley of El Gata, its farther spaces deepening to shadowy purple against the hills. While not unaware of the distant activities of the frustrated outlaws, reassembling at the pool, and doubtless preparing to advance across the range, he remained the serenely undisturbed arbiter of their immediate destiny. Two hours, at least, before they could gain the crest — or eternity, if they dared the narrow steep, from whence he could drop them one by one, like flicking pebbles into space. So, ignoring the ant-like hurryings and scurryings below, Temescal gave his attention to three vultures as they swept in easy circles back and forth across the contemplative level of his gaze. Presently a fourth and a fifth vulture drifted from invisibility into that rhythmic, leisurely waiting. 'Who summoned them to the feast?' Temescal asked himself. He drew his notebook from his pocket, intending to jot down a name for the hitherto unnamed pool below. He would have named it 'The

Feast of the Vultures.' Yet he did not write it down. The little, leather-bound notebook had been so chewed and crumpled by a bullet that, as Temescal ruefully observed, it looked more like a rat's nest than a neatly inscribed record of observation and comment. He recalled having felt an importunate nudge in the ribs as he had hastened up the last long slope of the ascent.

'So?' he murmured, and, rising, shook himself, as though he expected a shower of spent bullets to drop from his clothing. Drawing off his chaqueta, he viewed it solemnly. The back of the short leather jacket had been ripped by the rifle-fire of the bandits. 'There is still one sleeve intact,' he declared. 'A memento of Santuario.'

Exploring farther, he poked his finger down a slit in the close-fitting leg of his trousers. 'Not so bad.' He observed another hole in the wide bottom of the same trouser leg. 'Inventory!' He took off his sombrero. The wind flipped the crown over as though it had been hinged. 'Yet the mirror is unshattered!' he observed cheerfully. His smile faded as he gazed at himself in the mirror. He rubbed his chin. He had not shaved for three days, and he was, as they say, 'a man of vigorous beard.'

Pepito, finally realizing that Temescal was not following, hastened back to the edge of the cliff. His arrival seemed a matter of utter indifference to the great one, who gravely took stock of his furnishings; his mind, evidently as detached as his chaqueta.

Intuitively aware that the great one was displeased about something, Pepito grew even more puzzled and fearful as Temescal fastened what was left of his cha-

queta to the nearest cypress and hung the rim of his sombrero on a stub directly above the jacket. He tied his handkerchief about his head. Pepito trembled as he gazed at the great one, who, unshaven, shorn of the dignity of the sombrero and the conventionality of the jacket, appeared even wilder and more ferocious of mien and feature than the fiercest ladron of Cabazon.

Having satisfied himself that his person concealed no further unpleasant surprises, Temescal calmly sat down. Pepito advanced hesitatingly. Still Temescal remained darkly aloof, deliberately unconscious of Pepito's presence. Evidently the great one was so angry that he could not even utter his displeasure. Perhaps he was hungry. Pepito swung the small leather sack from his shoulder and, opening it, placed it cautiously within Temescal's reach. It was past noon.

As Pepito came within immediate range of his vision, Temescal noticed that the youth's clothing was literally in shreds and tatters torn by brush and rock in his wild flight — in fact quite like his own discarded jacket and sombrero.

Instantly Temescal leaped to his feet, seized the startled Pepito, turned him round in his tracks, inspected him from head to foot. 'I had thought to reprove you for your haste. Now it is that the rents and rags of your escape reprove me for my hasty inference.' He laid his hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder. 'Man, you could have parted with less, and lost more. You have little more than a waistband and a collar to distinguish you from Señor Adam before he parted with his regretted rib. Sacaton! That I should censure the loyalty of your feet in taking care of your head! There are those

who might call you, as the Americans say, a hoodoo. I prefer to consider you a mascot. Henceforth you are my boy, my mozo. Ten pesos a month, bed, board, and a new uniform. Attention, little rabbit!' — Conejo was Pepito's family name. 'From this desolate and breath-snatching height even down into the final valley of forgetfulness — which means from now on — you will follow me and defend my back. I shall take care of all approaches from the front. We are companions in a survival extraordinary. Also we are vagabonds — externally. In fact, I have little left, save you and my shadow. Take up the sack of food. We shall eat as we travel. To heel, rabbit! And do not hop ahead of my shadow as we go!'

Manfully endeavoring to follow the great one's flight of eloquence, Pepito snatched dizzily at such reassuring stabilities as 'mozo,' 'pesos,' 'food,' 'lodging,' and 'new uniform.' The rest of it he valiantly ignored, as most of us do when oratory reaches an altitude beyond our ken.

For one unaccustomed to much walking, Temescal set an exceedingly fast pace across the crest of the range which separated the somber wastelands of El Gata from the verdant valley of Santa Rosalia — and himself from La Luz. Having disciplined Pepito by example, having all but stunned him by a remarkable and largely uncomprehended address, and having distinguished him by making him his mozo, or boy-of-all-service, Temescal judiciously forgot him. The proverbial inch of intimacy should never become a mile. Meanwhile, Pepito, following Temescal down the wooded western slope, literally hopped in the great one's shadow, with antic fidelity to

his master's final injunction. Temescal had said 'Hop!' — so Pepito hopped.

Upon leaving the crest, they had shared the goat's meat and bread, munching it as they journeyed. Coming upon a tiny stream far down the mountain-side, Temescal knelt to drink. Observing that the shepherd boy was also about to drink farther upstream, Temescal gestured with his thumb, 'Downstream — always!'

'Here is where the horses drank, señor,' said Pepito, to whom food was food, water was water. The youth, however, moved a few feet downstream, but not below Temescal.

Temescal's frown became an arch of perplexity. 'I have a mozo!' he reflected, shaking his head. 'Also a preference.' And rising he walked round Pepito and drank above the hoofprints of the horses.

Refreshed by the cool water, enheartened by the frequently recurring evidence that Juan, Alejandro, and La Luz had suffered no accident or delay in their pilgrimage — in the softer earth of the woodlands the tracks of the two horses and the burro were as printed words — Temescal and his mozo struck on down the winding descent, nor paused again until among the treeless foothills. Below and beyond spread the fair green valley of Santa Rosalia. Directly in the pathway of the descending sun stood the town itself, a sharp-edged miniature of low-roofed adobes, a slender spire, the arched tops of street trees — suggesting in the aggregate the attempts of a child to build a house of blocks, leaving here and there a block for which there seemed to be no place in the structure.

Pepito, accustomed to the rugged and untilled pro-

spect of his native hills, the vista of fertile fields, orchards, and garden plots was an enchantment: to Temescal, even more.

Up from the valley came the faint, melodious sound of a bell tolled slowly. Temescal's hand went up to the brim of a sombrero that was not there. 'Sacaton!' he breathed; 'but I still have my head.'

Strange that, thenceforward, Temescal seemed depressed. His step was less brisk, his sprightliness had evaporated. His brow was heavy and his mouth stern. He walked as one on his way to perform an unpleasant duty, rather than to meet an inamorata. And naturally Temescal anticipated meeting La Luz within the next hour or so. He would find her, with her father and Juan, hospitably cared for by Captain José Hermanos, his officer and friend. A not unpleasant prospect — yet Temescal was depressed. Indigestion, fatigue, reaction from danger escaped — any of these might account for his depression. Or, like the war-horse of the Bible, he may have scented battle from afar.

Still hopping in Temescal's shadow — a still longer shadow in the setting sun — Pepito followed down the meandering foothill trail, turning occasionally to glance behind — guarding the great one's back. The hillside brush merged with the shadows of the brush itself. The afterglow of sunset faded into dusk. The trail, suddenly rounding a hill, was lost in the sand and rock of a deep barranca. From the nearer rocks, dimly discernible, rose each an elongated shadow. 'A ese!' called a voice. The shadows closed in and swiftly disarmed Temescal and Pepito.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFORETIME and officially Temescal had visited Santa Rosalia to inspect the headquarters of the rurales operating in that district. Their captain, José Hermanos, was an efficient and trusted officer. Hence, when the rurales who had arrested Temescal, escorted him to the office of their commander, Temescal was prepared to carry on the joke in case he was not immediately recognized; and finally, disclosing his identity, enjoy the captain's chagrin and surprise. Yet it was with chagrin and surprise that Temescal faced, not his old friend José Hermanos, but Captain Esteban Vaca, successor to Hermanos, and an officer of whom he knew nothing.

An unshaded lamp cast conflicting shadows of shoulders and sombreros on the whitewashed ceiling of the office as the rurales withdrew, leaving Temescal and Pepito virtually prisoners before the captain. Temescal would have at once declared himself had he not noticed that the picture of the President — which had hung above the desk for years — was missing. This he resented deeply, yet he said nothing. He decided to find out just what manner of man this new captain was before informing him that his men had arrested the Captain-General of the Rurales of Mexico. He realized that his presence in the environs of Santa Rosalia, armed, on foot, ragged, and accompanied by the equally ragged Pepito, called for a convincing explanation. It was evident that Captain Vaca did not recognize him.

Captain Vaca turned to Temescal, who gazed frowningly at the spot on the wall which should have been covered by the picture of the President.

'My men went out to meet Temescal the great bandido, not a ragged ladron,' declared the captain.

Temescal gazed at the wall above the captain's head. 'If I were shaved —?' he said.

Vaca smiled. 'If you were shaved you would look more like yourself — indeed not unlike the late Captain-General of Rurales.' Temescal's frown tightened at the intimation that he was extinct.

'Who was executed at Cabazon by Colonel Sylvestre Sanchez,' continued Captain Vaca. 'Perhaps you are aware that Colonel Sanchez was found buried under a rock in the cañon of Cabazon. It is said Temescal the bandido had a hand in the business. A sergeant in Sanchez's company said he recognized the Captain-General, who was traveling alone.'

'I was there,' said Temescal, endeavoring to discover what the other was getting at.

Captain Vaca laughed. 'I thought you would know something about it. Who is this boy?'

'My mozo.'

'Send him out. His ears are too long.'

Temescal told Pepito to go. 'Tell my family I shall be with them soon,' he said casually. And then to Vaca, 'Let one of your men direct the boy.'

'They are across the street, in the fonda,' said Vaca, gesturing.

Pepito did not want to leave the great one, but the great one had said go, so Pepito went.

'You know why Pancho sent you to me. You no

longer have to act stupid. Where are your men and how soon can they join us?' Vaca spoke brusquely.

Realizing that he had been mistaken for the Thief of Cabazon, Temescal immediately accepted the mistake and played his part.

'My men cross the Santa Rosalias — five hours away,' he declared, affecting the sullen, abrupt manner of the bandit Temescal.

'How many?'

'Twenty.'

'And horses?'

'Twenty — and eight pack-mules.'

'Good! But why did you not arrive with your family?'

'Did not my father-in-law explain?'

'The old one?' Vaca laughed. 'His jaw moved like the jaw of a goat, yet he would say nothing, save that Temescal followed.'

'Which was enough. I am here. I am also thirsty. Let us get through with this business.'

'Your woman — but she slapped my face!' declared Vaca. 'She is a wildcat.'

'Si!' said Temescal indifferently. 'Did not my lieutenant tell you that I was on my way with my men?'

'He with the wounded shoulder? He was too sick to talk.'

'He must have been very sick. Let us get through with this business.'

'Sit here' — and Vaca indicated a chair near his desk. He gestured toward the spot where the President's picture had been. 'I saw you looking for it. Evidently you know this room. Well, the old war-dog of Oaxaca has

lost his teeth. His big man, Don Ricardo Rayon, was executed at Cabazon, as you know. Naturally, he is no longer Captain-General of Rurales. From Ciudad Juarez comes word to make ready. Your old companion Doroteo has a grip on the peons of the North. Sonora waits only for the word. Chihuahua, Durango, Coahuila, have had enough of the dictator. Only the rurales have remained loyal to him. That is why Captain Hermanos got it in the back. I had the pleasure of attending to that.'

'A good job!' growled Temescal, who could have strangled Vaca then and there. José Hermanos had been almost as a brother to Temescal.

'Then you are with us?'

'Not so fast,' said Temescal. 'What do I get out of it? I furnish twenty fighting men, equipped and mounted. Thus far all I get is an arrest. Open the sack.'

'If the Maderistas win, you get a commission as captain in the regular army. Then are there not loot, women, aguardiente, ranchos, and horses — and more peons willing to be shot that you may become a general?'

'Talk!' exclaimed Temescal. 'I would see money.'

'As for that, I would see your men.'

'But you will. Even now they approach Santa Rosalia.'

'With the rurales of Durango at their heels, no?'

Temescal snapped his fingers. 'That for the rurales.'

Vaca smiled at Temescal's vindictive gesture, at his unshaven face, distorted by a peculiar grimace, at his rags, at his clumsy shoes. 'I have touched him in a tender spot,' mused Vaca. He had.

'I would see my woman,' declared Temescal, frowning at the wall.

'You will find your family at the fonda.' Captain Vaca's white teeth showed beneath his heavy mustaches.

Temescal swallowed hard. 'I will eat.'

'Who is this lieutenant of yours?' queried Vaca.

'A deserter from the army. He will do.'

'He knows how to keep his mouth shut.'

Temescal shrugged. Captain Esteban Vaca flattered himself that he had taken the measure of this peon-outlaw, this notorious leader of bandidos, to the end of the tape. The Thief of Cabazon was obviously stupid, ignorant, greedy, and, withal, forceful. He would be of use, because he was unscrupulous. In fact — Vaca rose, stretched, yawned. Taking up Temescal's rifle and belt and pistol, he gave them to him. 'A good gun,' observed Vaca, as he glanced at the polished ivory handle of the pistol.

'Where is my woman?' grunted Temescal as he buckled on the belt.

'With the others, at the fonda, across the street.'

'But who pays? I am a poor man,' said Temescal.

'Quien sabe? The old man complained that they had no money — that they waited for you.'

'Let them chew their tongues till I come,' said Temescal. The Thief of Cabazon himself could not have expressed himself more naturally.

Vaca smiled at this little pleasantry. Still smiling, he held out four golden hidalgos. 'Among us is one — Manuel Mercado of Zacatecas, who served under Captain Hermanos, whom I removed. I kept the old man because he knows this district better than the rurales

who came with me from the City of Mexico. But I have no further use for him. He asked me what I had done with the picture of the President. He is surly, and not difficult to quarrel with. It is said that you have a handy gun and a quick temper.'

'Both, Señor Captain.'

'Good! I shall speak to him as we go out, so that you may make no mistake.'

'You have dug a grave,' declared Temescal, taking the four pieces of gold and biting each one before he thrust it into his pocket. He would not make a mistake as to the man.

CHAPTER XXIV

AS they came out into the dimly lighted and all-but-deserted street — Santa Rosalia seemed aware of some impending danger — Captain Vaca paused to speak to a short, weazened, and singularly bright-eyed rural lounging beside the doorway. Temescal, directly behind the captain, yawned audibly, brushed his forehead with his knuckles, his thumb held toward the ground; a clumsy, bucolic gesture, quite in keeping with his appearance. Manuel Mercado, the rural whom Vaca had paid Temescal to assassinate, instantly recognized the sign as a brother-rural's warning to be on his guard against the man talking to him. In yawning while making 'the sign of the thumb,' Temescal had implied that the danger was not immediate.

The old rural acknowledged Vaca's recognition with a gruff 'Si, Señor Captain.' Yet his salute, as Vaca strode on, was for the ragged Temescal.

'A surly dog!' said Vaca, as they crossed the street, 'who will bite before he barks.'

'I have marked him,' declared Temescal. 'Now I will see my woman.'

'But, first, I would show you where your men will camp' — and Vaca indicated the plaza on their left. Though regretting the delay, Temescal was obliged to follow Vaca to the plaza and manifest an interest — not altogether assumed — in the suggested rendezvous of the bandidos.

From the broad steps of the church of San Marcos,

Temescal surveyed the deserted plaza — the shadowy pillars of the long low portals, the darker oblongs of the closed doors, the occasional blank windows of unlighted shops, and the central and ancient fountain murmuring in the starlit dusk. Vaca cast a quick glance at Temescal's expressionless face and smiled to himself contemptuously.

This ragged ladron, huge in the dusk, stoop-shouldered, clumsy both of mind and of body, seemed unduly deliberate in accepting a most practical and open suggestion as to the disposal of his followers.

'Your men will camp here,' said Vaca. 'There is water. And there is convenient shelter for the horses.' He waved his hand toward the darkened portals.

Temescal turned and gazed at the great archway of the church behind them. 'And here is a good fort — if we need it, eh, Father Vaca?' And his laugh was like the rumble of distant cannon as he slapped Vaca familiarly upon the shoulder.

'I see you know your trade,' said Vaca, shrugging the ache from his shoulder, for Temescal's stroke had been bear-like and heavy. 'Then it is settled?'

'They will camp in the plaza — or in hell!' declared Temescal. The bear was awake at last.

'First, I shall see my woman. Then I shall eat. Then I shall find excuse to quarrel with this Mercado.' Temescal counted upon his fingers as he spoke.

'You will find me in my office,' said Vaca, as they turned down the steps and walked toward the corner.

'Very soon you will hear from me.' Temescal touched his chest. Vaca strode across the street.

For a few seconds Temescal paused, gazing up and

down the sparsely lighted highway, as though looking for the inn which harbored his family. And in those few seconds he reviewed as many months. On a secret mission for the Government, he had been absent from headquarters almost half the year. Meanwhile he had been in communication with his office, which was seemingly blind to conditions in the Northern States of the Republic, or had deliberately ignored them. He could not believe that any of his own officers were in league with the rebels, in spite of the significance of Vaca's appointment as chief of the Zacatecas district and the murder of Captain José Hermanos. 'Yet,' reflected Temescal, 'I have neither dispatched nor received a report since I arrived at Cabazon. Much may have happened in the meantime. Has rumor spread a notice of my death and has the President appointed my successor? I shall get at the throat of this thing and choke an answer from it!'

Thus far Temescal had managed to contain his rage at the treachery and treason which threatened his country. Not that he had been unaware of a whispering unrest throughout the Northern States of Mexico. His months of personal investigation in the rural districts had recorded many sinister undercurrents of dissatisfaction among all classes; undercurrents not then deep nor seeming to converge toward any definite point. Yet now they were about to rise in a devastating torrent which would sweep the twin citadels of law and prosperity from the land.

As he turned and walked slowly toward the patch of light which marked the doorway of the distant inn, his anger cooled, crystallized, became a lump of ice, chilling his blood, contracting the arteries of his natural toler-

ance. Only one obstacle remained in the straight pathway of his swiftly perfected plan — the question of his official status. Was he or was he not Captain-General of Rurales?

Nor did it strike him as a strange coincidence that Manuel Mercado should step from the doorway of the cantina adjacent to the inn and, seemingly, blunder abruptly into him. Nothing was impossible!

'I excuse myself, General,' apologized Mercado.

Temescal seized Mercado's arm. 'You recognize me? Good! You caught my signal? Vaca would have you shot. Here is the price of your death — four dirty little hidalgos. Take them. Ride to Zacatecas. Inform Don Bernardo Venegas that rebellion is awake in the North. Then take the first train to the City of Mexico and report to my office.'

The old rural shook his head. 'Too late, Don Ricardo.' And further than the unofficial 'Don Ricardo,' Mercado need not have gone — yet Temescal experienced a certain bitter satisfaction in the gratuitous finality. 'Salvador Ruiz is now Captain-General of Rurales. The Lion of Oaxaca has become toothless.'

'So!' cried Temescal softly. 'Then, indeed, the buzzards will gorge themselves. Go with God, my friend. I go alone.'

'And these bandidos of Cabazon come,' said Mercado. 'I think it is that there will be a good fight, pretty soon.'

'Fight! You mean chaos! The President is President — but my rurales were the law of Mexico!'

'Si, Don Ricardo. But you have a small piece of the law left, no?' Weazened little Mercado tapped his own

chest. 'Me, I think it is that I go with you. But first, I will kill Vaca. You wait here a little while, no?'

'Are you married?' queried Temescal abruptly.

'Me? Four times. The last one —' Mercado brushed his sleeve as though he flicked off a pestiferous insect.

'Quite so. Do this. Leave Vaca to me. Get your horse and go round to the rear of the posada and wait.'

The old rural saluted, and turning walked stiffly up the street.

Temescal, swinging into the general room of the posada, told the innkeeper's wife — who stared suspiciously at his rags, the handkerchief bound round his head, his fierce, unshaven face — to take him to his family. His manner was blunt, his voice lacked its usual courteous inflection. The innkeeper's wife lighted a candle, and, padding hastily down a dim, narrow corridor, indicated a door.

Temescal knocked, declared himself, entered the suddenly hushed room like a burst of wind from the desert.

Alejandro, lying upon the narrow, rickety bed, raised himself on his elbow, opened his mouth to speak, but had no chance. Juan reached for his pistol on the window-ledge. La Luz, having shrewdly recognized Temescal's voice in the corridor, was standing expectantly in the middle of the low-ceilinged room, her lips parted, her dark eyes eager-bright, her brown hand clasped about the little silver crucifix at her throat.

'Mi corazon!' cried Temescal, dropping his carbine upon the bed and barking Alejandro's shins. In one gigantic stride, Temescal reached La Luz, swept her up into his arms, held her close for an instant, and then,

taking her face between his hands, he kissed her upon the mouth.

'And now that that is understood,' said Temescal, his tone matter-of-fact, incontrovertible, 'we shall get to business.'

La Luz may have gasped in sudden wonder at Temescal's unexpected appearance, his all-embracing and soul-staggering impetuosity. If so, none but Temescal could have observed it. How she had hungered for his return, hungered desperately, silently, since Pepito — now staring blankly at the great one as though he had risen from the tomb — had rushed into the room to tell them that the great one stood disarmed before the Chief of the Rurales — a prisoner! Yet here he was, superlatively himself!

Old Alejandro most assuredly gasped — not so much because of Temescal's startling advent as at his vigorous and obviously acceptable salutation of La Luz — to say nothing of his carelessness in disposing of the carbine. 'Already he treats me like a father-in-law,' reflected Alejandro, as he rubbed his shins thoughtfully.

Juan, however, being a soldier, swallowed his surprise, and immediately experienced a faint after-taste of masculine jealousy. Only a minute before Temescal's tumultuous arrival, Juan had suggested that, as Don Ricardo's career most probably would end in smoke against an adobe wall, it might be well to depart before they also had become entangled in the rope which bound him. Even as he spoke, Juan had kept one ear cocked for the sound of a volley.

Yet, disappointing Juan's most natural and not entirely selfish anticipation, the man himself had burst in

upon them with the wild vigor of a desert cyclone, his fluttering rags suggesting whirling twigs and leaves, his brow the dark, portentous, following cloud, his eye the flash of lightning from beneath, his voice the importunate spirit of the storm. Or so it seemed to Juan. La Luz liked vigorous weather.

So Juan, having swallowed his surprise, curled his lip, turned his head sideways, and gazed down at the unaccusing floor, somewhat like a dog caught in a corner with chicken feathers sticking to its nose.

Temescal seemed to have become taller of stature, broader of chest — and he was, in no manner of speaking, a small man. His suppressed ego filled the room with a disturbing pressure, like electricity imprisoned by the sultry calm of a summer day. The sinews of his sturdy arm showed through a rent in his sleeve.

'Misfortune has hurled me among you again. But I have landed on my feet. Have you had supper?'

'Si!' chorused his adopted family, glad to relieve their accumulating emotions in speech.

'Good! Señor Alejandro, my money-belt, if you please.'

'But has my man eaten?' queried La Luz, moving swiftly to Temescal.

'I have no appetite. I am full-fed on treason, mi corazon. Forgive me. I am abrupt. But my time is in the hands of a thief.'

'Treason!' Alejandro, sitting on the edge of the bed, ceased fumbling with the buckle of the money-belt, and employed his hands in vigorous expostulation. 'But no treachery was intended! Juan is guiltless! He did but suggest that, if you were dead, we should employ a new

plan for our safety. This town of Santa Rosalia seems unfriendly. It scowls at us from empty portals and unopened doors. And your arrest distressed us, Don Ricardo. Here is the money — all of it. I have spent not one centavo.'

Temescal caught up the belt, thrust it into his shirt. 'Fetch me some water!' he commanded the staring Pepito. 'Pronto! I have but a borrowed handful of time. Already the sand runs through my fingers.'

Juan rose and buckled on his pistol. 'What was wrong, señor? Did the rurales mistake you for the bandido Temescal?'

'None other. But if that were all! How is your shoulder?'

'Since La Luz washed and bandaged it anew, I have less fever.'

'Good! But where is La Luz?'

'Gone to fetch your supper, señor.'

'Then I shall have to eat it. You will find a friendly rural waiting at the rear door. Fetch him here.'

Temescal turned to Alejandro, who was tenderly inspecting his damaged shins. 'What grace of fortune kept you from giving my letter to Captain Vaca — that black assassin who did for my friend and loyal officer, Hermanos?'

'Your friend assassinated! But that explains much! When I inquired for your friend as we entered the town, one told me, whispering, that he had been removed from office; that Captain Esteban Vaca was now Chief of Rurales. Not knowing what kind of man this Vaca might be, and recalling our recent discussion in regard to political conditions, I destroyed the letter. Arrived

at the posada, this Captain Vaca questioned us. Juan played the invalid, and I, I employed the misfortune of my deformity. Serving the precedent of a jester's privilege, I wagged my chin, and showed the curious captain an open mouth and an empty mind. "Temescal follows," I told him, as it were a monstrous jest, a cunning secret shared. He laughed, as fools will always laugh at fools. When he asked me if this Temescal was the Thief of Cabazon, por Dios, señor, but La Luz flew into a fury and boxed his ears! I saw my grave open at my feet; for had he lifted his hand to her, I should have strangled him. Yet he smiled through the flame of his face, the while his eyes ravaged the bright color of her cheeks. "I see you are his woman," said this Vaca. And then I thought that La Luz would surely use her little knife. But, señor, she smiled, though her eyes for Vaca were proud and contemptuous. So he left us to ourselves.'

'You did well. The Saints inspired you.'

'Even so, I am not entirely unfamiliar with the history of the Latin princes, Don Ricardo.'

'You may have opportunity to continue the study of intrigue, if my plan runs true,' declared Temescal. 'Mexico is in revolt.'

'Santa Maria! And the many guns at your command?'

'They serve under Ruiz. The Lion of Oaxaca has become toothless. Should he roar, it would be all the more evident.'

'But what of you, Don Ricardo?'

'As you see me, derelict.' Temescal paused, listening; he stepped to the door and opened it to Juan and the old rural.

'How goes it out there, Mercado?' he queried.

'The streets are empty. There is a breeze from the mountain. Santa Rosalia is too quiet.'

'Even so, your hand from your gun, old warrior. A girl wears the high-heeled boots that you hear.' As Pepito and La Luz entered, Temescal announced his guest and sweepingly introduced his family. Then he excused himself, washed hurriedly, readjusted the handkerchief about his head, and drew up to the chair on which La Luz had placed a platter of bread and cheese and a bottle of wine.

Temescal's supper was the merest incidental — a grace-note in the hurriedly executed theme established by the old rural Mercado, who wanted to know what was to be done about the anticipated arrival of the other Temescal and his bandidos.

'Can we make a regiment of these?' — and Temescal indicated his family with an ironic nod.

'This one has seen service,' declared the literal Mercado, his thumb toward Juan. 'The muchacho might do to care for the horses. The girl will fight if she has to. But as for the old one — it would be well to leave him behind.'

'Blunt — though sound enough. But five of us against the universe? The idea would be pitiful if the picture were not so ludicrous. Where may I find a refuge for Señor Alejandro and his daughter?'

'Not in Santa Rosalia, Don Ricardo. To-night the bandidos of Cabazon arrive. To-morrow, three companies of rebels from Durango will come. Doroteo recruited them. Vaca will command the new army. So it is told among us.'

'Perhaps. He has yet to meet the Thief of Cabazon and hatch more treason. I would break that egg on their heads. But of Señor Alejandro and his daughter — have you no friend you may trust?'

'None — unless the Padre Anselmo would care for them. He is a good man, but he isn't my friend. He is a priest. Padre Anselmo and his acolyte live in some hole back of the church like a couple of gophers. The rest of the long-robes have skipped out. There is much loot in San Marcos.'

'The church! And I was this minute thinking of the church,' mused Temescal. Rising, he brushed the crumbs from his shirt, emptied the bottle of wine, and cleared his throat. 'I shall find this Padre Anselmo and talk with him. Meanwhile, you and my mozo will fetch four horses to the alley back of San Marcos. Hold them at the postern. The finding of the fourth horse is a difficulty which I leave to you. We shall need four horses.'

'Horses!' groaned Alejandro. 'These reprisals, these midnight rides! My bones ache. I am too old for such rough work. I despair that we shall ever —'

'Old! Despair!' Temescal shook his clenched hand toward the ceiling as though challenging the elements to launch a further calamity upon him. 'Old?' he said softly, his hands gripping the front of his ragged shirt. 'Despair?' He laughed bitterly. 'I have lived to become the grandfather of all despair. Behold me, but yesterday Don Ricardo Rayon of Escobar, Captain-General of the Rurales of Mexico: Law and defense of the law, adviser to the President, his public friend, his private counselor. And more' — Temescal bowed his

head, gazed at the floor — 'I was his companion. His shadow moved with mine. We were in tune. Together we saw the jest before the tale was half-told. At cards, at chess, at wine, we were relentless antagonists. Neither would yield a finger other than to unquestionable defeat. Great was Porfirio, and I was his friend.'

Old Mercado coughed, shuffled. Temescal glanced up. Affection and admiration for the loyal old rural lightened Temescal's somber eyes.

'You recall me to my duty. Allow me but a word, that you may understand my position. I am dishonored, dead, forgotten. The wheel turns. I have no office, no authority, no power. My estates will have been confiscated. Envy and treason have consumed my fortunes. I have not even the hope of a pordiosero, for I will not beg. Nor have I any hope to offer you. I am a roofless house, an unhinged door, an empty well. My shadow lines the bottom of the Pit.'

'Nay, but I think you are always Temescal,' said La Luz.

'Name of a Name!' cried Temescal. 'I chose it in jest, yet for a purpose. Now it has chosen me.' He flung out his arm as though tossing away an empty sack. 'I am the jest! Henceforth I bear no name, save Temescal.'

Though not unmoved by Temescal's misfortunes, old Mercado still kept one foot on the uneasy neck of Chance. 'Temescal is as good a name to fight under as any. Have I your permission to fetch the horses, Don Ricardo?'

'Horses! Ai, fetch a thousand, and a thousand rurales, and we'll play marbles with these Liberals.'

'I think I can find four,' declared Mercado. He saluted and, followed by Pepito, left the room.

'Horses!' whispered Temescal. 'The word commands me! We ride with the moon. Sacaton! But I am dizzy with memories. Señor Alejandro, gather what things you have — and you, La Luz. Juan, you are lucky — you have nothing. Meanwhile I shall pay the good woman, who must be worrying about the money for our fare and lodging.'

'We are as dust before his breath,' murmured Alejandro as he rose stiffly. 'And what may dust do when the wind harries it?'

Temescal had but stepped from the room to the dim corridor when La Luz was at his side.

'You will fight the bandidos, Temescal?'

'Yes.'

'And then?'

'The horses, mi corazon. I still have one friend — the night.'

'But what of me?' whispered La Luz.

'This — till the fight is ended, golden one!' Stooping, Temescal caught her yielding body in his arms. Her upturned face was as a golden flower in the dusk — her lips a passion and a benediction.

CHAPTER XXV

PADRE ANSELMO and his acolyte, a young Indian from the suburbs of Morelia, alone remained to guard the treasures of San Marcos Church. The good father had received a letter from the Governor, advising him to close San Marcos and retire to some distant and inconspicuous village where he might rest and recover from the fatigue of his ardent labors among the flocks and herds — so the Governor included both the sheep and the goats — of his community. Padre Anselmo, a mildly stubborn, benign, and, withal, shrewd spirit, read much between the lines, as had been intended. He observed the warning — in reality a friendly command — by sending all those who served with him, save his acolyte, to San Salvador, a monastic retreat in the Santa Rosalia hills. In acknowledging the Governor's letter, Padre Anselmo stated that much to his regret he had closed the church. Yet it seems that Anselmo neglected, or possibly forgot, to mention that he and his acolyte still remained in the town of Santa Rosalia, and in possession of the sacred keys, the chalices and vestments.

They lived, meanwhile, in the dark, narrow cloisters overlooking the stone-walled court at the rear of the church, their seclusion undisturbed and largely unsuspected. They ate little food — and that uncooked. Fruit and raw vegetables were healthful, and easily obtained. Water they had from the fountain in the court.

Serving their respective offices faithfully, they up-

held the austere traditions of their calling and their House. They dwelt, as it were, in the spirit, yet were obliged to face an occasional fleshly actuality — the necessity for secretly procuring food with which to sustain their passive vigilance. It was the acolyte's duty to observe this more or less worldly ritual.

Each night at nine o'clock this faithful servitor — a stupid mozo had one met him upon the street — stole out from the shadowy postern of San Marcos and, venturing along remote byways, secured provisions from a devout meztizo living in the squalid Calle del Campo Santo. Returning to his refuge and his superior, the acolyte would receive a nod of approval, which meant more to the brown fanatic than all the legend-gold of his Aztec sires.

On such an occasion — their larder empty — the youth had silently opened the postern door and had glided out, his sandals scarcely lisping on the cobbles of the alley, when he was seized from behind, and vigorously. An arm, like the constricting folds of a python, bound his arms to his sides. This arm, which had seized and bound him, seemed to realize that while the acolyte served the church, provoked, he might serve heredity by resorting to a concealed knife.

'Do you serve Father Anselmo?' questioned a hot voice close to his ear.

'Give me breath!' gasped the acolyte.

Temescal's hug relaxed the least fraction. 'I see you are a churchman. You have breath for three irrelevant words when a nod would suffice. Return, then, to his Eminence, and say to him that Señor Alejandro Contrario and his daughter, fleeing from danger, wait at the

postern, petitioning sanctuary. Repeat me, word for word!'

Yet the stubborn acolyte, now aware of the figures of a man and a woman standing near, refused to obey or to speak at all.

'So!' said Temescal softly. 'Then, if in your mistaken loyalty you will not convey our petition to the good Father, our unmistaken necessity will. March as straight to him as the devious channels of the Church will permit. No tricks! Else my knee is in your back, and out goes your candle!'

Padre Anselmo's startled eyes absorbed the details of the strange group that stood uncovered in his stark and narrow cell. Having done with the details — rags, bandoliers, rough garments, profane weapons, and attitudes — the latter deferential in spite of the wild ensemble, the priest turned to his acolyte: 'These asked for sanctuary?'

The acolyte bowed to his superior. 'Yes, Padre,' he answered humbly.

'And you would have refused them?'

Temescal raised his hand. 'We had no time for formal overtures, good Father. The youth is blameless of this rude intrusion. We present no threat, but a petition. I speak for all. Yet, if it please you, I would talk with you alone.'

'As you wish,' said Anselmo, bowing. 'We will retire to another room.'

Father Anselmo showed Temescal to a distant, similar narrow cell, with its meager bed and low, wooden stool.

Anselmo gestured toward the stool. 'You are not ac-

customed to standing before priests or officers? Will you not be seated?'

Temescal bowed. 'You have answered your own question. I await the privilege.'

Father Anselmo sat upon the edge of the narrow cot. Temescal drew the stool close.

'Here is the core of it. Treason has filled our land with marching men. Within an hour or so, twenty bandidos, summoned here by Captain Vaca of the rurales, will camp in the plaza. To-morrow three companies from Durango will arrive. Santa Rosalia will suffer. I ask sanctuary for the old man who is with me, and for his daughter. Upon a recent occasion they befriended me. They have committed no crime, nor have I. I shall leave money for their maintenance. But yesterday — you would have received me without question. To-day —'

'To-day I receive you as a known friend, my son. Your beard is a poor disguise, Don Ricardo.'

'You knew the Captain-General?'

'Knew him for a just man, as did all. Knew him, at least, as one might know the President.'

'You speak with Temescal — none other.'

'A dangerous name, Don Ricardo; the antithesis of your former self and office. He of Cabazon —'

'Even now descends upon Santa Rosalia. Hence I am here, with my family. You say I am disguised. I was never more myself. As for these bandidos, they may not attempt to loot the church. But do not depend upon Captain Vaca to stay them. He would recruit these ladrones to his treasonable uses. He gathers an army. Yet the ladrones may take things into their own hands. I would warn you —'

'Already I have had warning. Hence I have closed the church. As for Captain Vaca, I think you do him an injustice. He has offered to protect this holy property. I have some evidence —'

'Your pardon, but may I know what this evidence is?'

Father Anselmo hesitated.

Temescal did not press the question. Then, abruptly: 'I would no longer intrude upon your authority. Yet I would arrange for the care of the old man and his daughter.' And this Temescal contrived by leaving with Anselmo half his decreasing stock of gold, and a promise to secure their maintenance so long as they were obliged to dwell within the shelter of San Marcos.

Returning with Father Anselmo, Temescal introduced his family. The priest assigned to Alejandro and La Luz each a room and such meager conveniences as the place allowed. With the conclusion of the arrangement, Temescal signaled to Juan, intimating that they would observe their devotions before leaving the church.

While the acolyte again adventured to secure provisions, and Alejandro, desperately weary, slept, La Luz, alone in the close-walled darkness of her cell, suffered a loneliness and a dread of loneliness that drew her to the narrow window, where she stood gazing up at the dusky sky and the far and strangely unfamiliar stars. She did not reason that her father and herself were safe, and that she should be content that this was so. She thought only of Temescal, of his once great name, of his misfortune, of his desperate plight. She grieved that she could do nothing to help or comfort him. Indeed, it would seem that he had no need of her. She knew that soon he would say farewell, and that he

might never return. 'But he shall not go!' she whispered, and her mouth trembled. She listened eagerly for the sound of his step in the corridor.

Meanwhile, Juan and Temescal explored the aisles and angles of the unlighted church, a sacred candle serving a profane utility. Satisfied with his inspection —ancient San Marcos was a veritable fortress—Temescal would have returned immediately to Father Anselmo and asked for the keys that he might admit Mercado and Pepito to the courtyard where they might hold the horses in readiness for an instant retreat, but he was delayed by a peculiar accident. In turning to retrace his steps, he shouldered into Juan, who, in the dim light, did not anticipate this sudden movement. Juan stepped back, tripped over a shrouded something behind him, and fell heavily. They had been inspecting the timbered doors of the portal. Temescal turned to discover Juan wrestling with what appeared to be a heap of white canvas.

'The font,' said Temescal. 'The good Father has covered it —'

'Has a font wheels?' queried Juan, rising.

Temescal held the candle aloft. Seizing the edge of the canvas he pulled it toward him. The fluted cylinder of a machine-gun gleamed dully in the flickering light.

'So!' said Temescal. 'And this is why Vaca would have had my men camp in the plaza?'

A brief examination disclosed several thousand rounds of ammunition in cases from which the covers had been loosened, and replaced without the nails, evidently in anticipation of a possible and local emergency.

'This explains much,' declared Temescal. 'Thus

Vaca has made San Marcos a blind and Padre Anselmo his dupe. You will remain at your devotions while I return to the priest. If aware of this, he was singularly reticent; if not aware, singularly blind. In either, he proves himself the churchman. Guard the gun, meanwhile.'

'You will defend the church if those of Cabazon should attempt to loot it?'

'Could we do less?' — and Temescal turned abruptly, leaving Juan a somewhat disgruntled and nervous sentinel.

'No, we could not do less,' reflected Juan, 'but it would be like him to do more. He is crazed by misfortune and this talk of rebellion. And yet . . . it may be . . . the rebels may win . . . they will need officers . . .' Juan filched a candle from the shrine of an obviously disinterested Saint, and, familiar with the mechanism of the machine-gun, inspected it critically. 'This will do,' he said ambiguously, 'until something better offers.' In fact, anything would be better than inaction, since La Luz had called Temescal 'my man.'

Yet it would be ungenerous to criticize harshly the young soldier — now a noted official in the present Government. War was his trade, youth was his intimate counselor, the treachery of a superior had outlawed him, and love — as he had interpreted love — had in one instance, at least, ignored him. Like many a blameless soldier of his land, he was confused as to who advanced the ultimate welfare of his country. And one may surmise that he still asks himself that question.

Crossing the chancel to reach the narrow stone stairway leading back to the cloister, Temescal paused. A

faint vibration, like the distant rumble of heavy wheels upon cobblestones, disturbed the hushed air of the church. 'That would be the horses of the Thief,' he murmured. Hastening up the stairway, he came upon Padre Anselmo bearing an antique iron candle-lantern, and a ring of huge tinkling keys.

'Your friend?' questioned the Padre, noting Juan's absence.

'Remains at his devotions. May I serve you, Father?'

'There is some one at the postern. I fear that my acolyte forgot to lock it.'

'My fault,' declared Temescal briskly. 'Allow me to retrieve the oversight.' And taking the good Father's acquiescence for granted, Temescal grasped the ring of keys, and was gone before the gentle Padre had quite realized it.

'That would be Mercado.' Temescal paused within the shadow of the lower doorway as he beheld the dim blur of moving horses within the court. 'He tried the door, and entered, when another would have knocked and asked for entrance. Assuredly he is one of mine.'

Following down the stairway came the curious lantern of Father Anselmo, its soft rays flickering slowly forward as though to determine the meaning of trampling hoofs within the court. Bearing swiftly toward the postern, Temescal passed Mercado with a whispered word, locked the door, and turned to face Anselmo's inquisitive lantern.

'You look for an honest man?' said Temescal. 'You find him here; Manuel Mercado, whom, no doubt, you thought you knew.'

'The rural? Yes. But why here, with this other, and these horses?'

'Does sanctuary discriminate, Father Anselmo? Even the horses may have souls — quien sabe? I have known men less noble.'

'You evade my question, Don Ricardo.' The Padre's tone was sharp.

'I evade nothing, your Eminence.'

'Plain Anselmo, if you please.'

'Plain Temescal would also please me more.'

'Then Señor Temescal' — Padre Anselmo's thin, dark face was stern — 'lacking authority of your former office, I warn you to commit no aggression, contrive no reprisal or attack beneath this sacred roof. Defend San Marcos, you may.'

'This sacred roof, Anselmo?' And Temescal gestured broadly toward the stars. 'Are not your towers aggressive toward the sky? But should we dissect a futile subtlety when the bandidos of Cabazon are encamped before your doors?'

'It is so!' declared Mercado. 'Shall I tie the priest and put him on the shelf until we have made the fight, Temescal?'

'Tie me!'

'Not so, friend Anselmo. Mercado is a plain fighting man. The Church has employed many such. The wheel turns. Are the horses ready, Mercado?'

'A morral for each, with two feeds of grain.'

'Good! It will be south, across the open land. Carbines, Mercado?'

'One extra, for the soldado, and an extra hundred rounds.'

Temescal turned to Padre Anselmo. 'We are prepared to leave you, but not undefended, Anselmo. The hour of our departure is not set, but it is assured. I shall join Juan in his prolonged devotions. You, Mercado —'

'I think it is that I shall go outside awhile. I have a little message for Captain Vaca. I will give it to him — then I shall come back.'

'Quite so. Pepito, stay here and look after the horses.'

Unlocking the postern to let Mercado out, Temescal told him in three startling words of the machine-gun, closed the door, and again locked it. From in front of San Marcos came a murmuring of voices, the shuffling of many feet. A faint glow spread about the plaza, hovering above the camp-fire of the bandidos.

'Forgive me if I have distressed you.' Temescal took Father Anselmo's arm. 'I am outworn with the weight of a thousand calamities. For you I have only respect and admiration. I have trusted you with those dearest to me. Will you not rest and leave me to guard the doors?'

'I would view the plaza from the north tower,' said Anselmo.

'I shall accompany you,' declared Temescal.

CHAPTER XXVI

PEERING through a slot in the ancient massive wall of the north tower of the church, Father Anselmo contemplated the rude activities in the plaza below. Near the fountain burned a huge fire which flung a sinister red flare across the battered sombreros, the dark faces, and the glittering bandoliers of the bandidos. But recently arrived, they adapted themselves handily to their new environment, watering their horses at the fountain, kindling a smaller fire for cooking, and each preparing to camp for the night. The glow of the central fire hung like a blood-red mist above the plaza. Beyond loomed the black, serrated bulk of the Santa Rosalia hills, against a velvet curtain jeweled with stars.

'By whose authority, in Mexico?' murmured Temescal, gazing over Anselmo's shoulder.

The broad, solid figure of the Thief of Cabazon was not apparent among the outlaws. Though not aware that Captain Vaca already had sent a rural to meet them in friendly parley, Temescal surmised that something of the kind had occurred. He wondered how this other Temescal would explain himself.

'They seem quite at home,' observed Temescal. 'Witness, Anselmo, they do not keep close to their horses, but have tied them to the posts of the portal. They have built a fire — and a smaller fire for the cooking. Their bold insouciance is more of an insult to Santa Rosalia than an attack. My neck bristles. I sweat cold.'

'True; Vaca does not dispute their possession of the town,' said the priest.

'And thus he guards your church.'

Anselmo shook his head. Then, instantly, 'There is Captain Vaca!' As he spoke Vaca and five mounted rurales rode into the plaza and halted near the fountain.

'And yonder comes the Thief of Cabazon,' whispered Temescal, as the broad and solid figure of the outlaw chief appeared on the farther side of the plaza. The bandit captain, astride his horse, was accompanied by his lieutenant, also mounted.

Recognizing — as he thought — the bandido Temescal, Captain Vaca rode forward to welcome him formally. The bandidos had become suddenly silent, each caught in the attitude of his immediate occupation. About to make a speech of welcome which would include the information that his was the ultimate authority, although they served the Thief of Cabazon, Vaca raised his hand. A shot, like the crack of a whip, snapped the tense silence. Vaca flung up his arms — dropped forward on the neck of his horse.

'That would be Manuel Mercado,' murmured Temescal.

The alert rurales, enraged by the killing of their captain, spurred straight for the group about the bandit leader, firing as they charged. The surprised bandidos scattered right and left, then, as the rurales swept on across the plaza, each outlaw turned and emptied rifle or six-shooter at the speeding horsemen. The sheer volume of rifle and pistol fire literally blew the six rurales from their saddles — annihilated them.

Father Anselmo, in the window of the tower, thrust

out his hands in futile expostulation. Suddenly he realized that Temescal was not beside him. Even as he turned in surprise, Anselmo heard the tower door close softly, heard the key click in the lock. He rushed to the door, called Temescal's name, swept back to the window, clenched his hands, and stared down upon the tumult and the horror.

Wrought into frenzy by the unprovoked assault of the rurales, by the sight of men down and dying, by the screaming of wounded horses, and the ever-present fear of treachery, the bandidos massed round the fountain.

'We have been betrayed!' they cried. 'Santa Rosalia shall pay.'

'Loot!' shrilled a nasal voice, and, 'The Church! Kill the pigs!'

Temescal, behind the huge iron-studded doors of San Marcos, peered through the key-hole, then, straightening up, thrust the key into the lock. 'Ready?' he asked Juan.

'Si! But first I shall blow out the candle.'

The heavy door swung slowly open. Black against the plaza fire loomed a tumultuous mass. Temescal stepped round to the breech of the gatling and depressed the muzzle. He grasped the crank. 'Welcome!' he shouted as the massed bandidos swayed forward. And straightway he put 'The Shoemaker' to work.

The imprisoned air of the church entrance shook with the roaring stutter of the machine-gun. The dark bulk of the approaching bandidos wavered, disintegrated, disappeared as though swallowed by the sea. Remained the flotsam — an arm thrust up against the red glare of the fire; a figure on its knees, bowing toward the church

as though performing some ghastly ritual; a shape that writhed in horrible contortions; a hand feebly clawing at emptiness.

Above, in the dark room of the tower, Padre Anselmo knelt, his head bowed, his frail hands clutching the coarse fold of the cassock beneath his throat. Stunned by the sudden horror of the midnight carnage, his numb lips refused even to shape the words of a prayer. Yet his spirit, burning up through the shell of his body, ascended to the Omnipotence he served, in an anguished petition of mercy for the writhing wounded, the souls of those already sped, and for the soul of him who had so wantonly killed Captain Esteban Vaca.

Limned on the naked walls, Anselmo beheld, as in a vision, a sequence of reprisals, outrages unspeakable, starvation, disease, and all the untold misery of war and wanton devastation. Against the sanguinary screen appeared a rough-hewn cross, upon it a somber vulture, gorged motionless; a phantasy of rifles borne by mere boys; of dead, bestial faces, swarms of myriad flies; of homes abandoned, fields desolate with weeds, herds scattered and destroyed, industries idle, and the Holy Church ravished of treasure. And, oh, the pity and the shame of it!

Yet, had the devout Anselmo been capable of reasoning in that moment, he would have realized that the murderer of Vaca was but the blind tool of the very Omnipotence he implored. The chancel is ever narrower than the body of the Church, the vestry narrower still.

Temescal, treading upon empty cartridges, swung the portal of San Marcos and locked it. He rubbed the acrid smoke from his eyes.

Back through the dark nave he found his way, walking unsteadily. Juan followed, chewing the knuckle of his forefinger and staring into the darkness. Through the chancel, the vestry, and out into the court he followed Temescal, who walked as one in his sleep. Unlocking the postern, Temescal admitted Mercado, yet had no word for him.

'The fountain bleeds,' said Mercado.

Temescal nodded and passed on up to the cloister.

Old Alejandro, a blanket about his misshapen shoulders, sat huddled on his bed, aware of desperate happenings, unseen, scarcely echoed in his cell.

Temescal thrust out his hand. 'Farewell,' he said, yet he gazed at the floor.

'The battle? The bandidos?' exclaimed Alejandro, and found no answer.

Nor did La Luz, who ran to Temescal, caressed his sleeve, implored his eyes with eyes expectant, questioning.

'Is my man wounded?' she asked, suddenly alarmed.

'Aye, deep!' — and Temescal turned away.

The next few minutes found him in the north room of the tower, silent before Anselmo's scourging voice. Of what was spoken, no man has record save the priest and Temescal. Yet it is known that Temescal came from the naked room, his dark face flushed, his hands clenched, his eyes glowing dully, his attitude that of one who finds restraint a heavy task.

Meanwhile, La Luz had descended to the court and talked with the rural Mercado. Juan, seeing, bit his lip, frowned, fingered the buckle on his belt.

Presently Mercado laughed. 'It shall be as Captain

Temescal commands.' Then to Juan, 'Tell Don Ricardo I shall return very soon.'

'If you have a message, here is his mozo,' said Juan, gesturing toward Pepito, who held the horses.

Mercado turned sharply, his elbow up, his hand hollowed above the butt of his pistol. '*You* will tell him.'

It seemed most natural to Alejandro that La Luz should seek his sympathy. Temescal would soon depart, possibly never to return to them. And so, La Luz having entered his room, Alejandro endeavored to comfort her with assurances and shrewd proverbs, dry and ancient. Alejandro, in his fatherly conceit, did not consider it strange that La Luz endeavored to comfort him, kissing his brown and withered cheek, smoothing his silvery hair, and caressing his huge awkward hands.

'Has Temescal departed?' queried Alejandro.

'Not yet, my father.'

'A strange man, and, I think, a little mad.'

La Luz gazed at her father with unreadable eyes.

'You should be in your room. It is late,' said Alejandro.

'Good-night, my father. I go where I belong.'

Down in the court, Pepito and Juan led the horses through the postern and held them in the alley, awaiting Temescal. As they waited, one came running toward them. Pistol at hip, Juan would have halted him, but recognized Mercado's voice, then Mercado himself bearing a bundle in his arms.

'Temescal waits for me?' he asked as he saw the horses.

'We wait for him,' grunted Juan.

Mercado slipped past, pattered across the court, and, ascending the stairway to the cloister, thrust the bundle into the outstretched hands of La Luz. 'Hasten!' he whispered. 'I shall make excuse to wait for you when the others have gone. But hasten!'

Swiftly La Luz braided her heavy hair, whipped the little knife from her garter, and holding the braid close, sawed it off. For a second or so she gazed at the glossy braid, then tossed it on the cot. She blew out the candle, undressed and donned the shirt, chaquetilla, and breeches which Mercado had stripped from a dead rural. With much difficulty she pulled on Temescal's boots, because the legs of the buckskin breeches were so snug. Her sarape about her shoulders, its folds muffling her face, she stole past her father's doorway and down the corridor. From below came the sound of Temescal's voice, subdued by distance and his heavy mood. Her face was flushed, her heart beat fast. Presently she heard the sound of hoofs on the cobbles of the alley.

Hastening down to the court, she found it empty. She called Mercado's name, pattered over to the postern, gazed up and down the empty alleyway.

'But, no!' she whispered, 'Mercado is an honest man. He would not deceive me. And he did, I shall tell Temescal to kill him!'

She waited, holding her breath, listening. Presently she heard the clap and clatter of shod hoofs in echoes tossed back and forth between the walls of the street. A rider, with a led horse, swept round the corner and up to the postern.

Mercado tossed to her the reins of a big, restive horse. 'A present from Captain Vaca,' said Mercado. 'This

was to have been his war-horse. But Vaca does not ride.'

Lithely La Luz swung up into the saddle, checked the impatience of the hot-blooded animal. 'But Captain Vaca would make *me* no present. I slapped his face to-day.'

'A present from Vaca,' reiterated the old rural. 'But I give him to you.'

'There was a fight? I heard the shooting,' declared La Luz, as they moved briskly down a remote and silent street.

'A good fight, señorita. Six rurales down, and if there are any bandidos left to groan, I did not hear them when I stripped this one' — and Mercado gestured toward the clothing La Luz wore.

'Yes. There is a hole through the chaquetilla and the shirt. I shall have to wash them and mend them,' said La Luz.

'Yes. But the best I could find. And Vaca will not need them.'

'They were his?'

Mercado did not answer.

'Where does Temescal ride?' La Luz queried presently.

'Across the faces of the dead until he is killed. Have you the heart to follow him, señorita?'

CHAPTER XXVII

BEYOND the rural environs of Santa Rosalia, where the white road swings from the foothills and crosses the high plateau south of the last ranchito, Temescal, with Juan Sepulveda and Pepito, reined in their horses and waited for Mercado.

Juan fretted silently. Their case was perilous. He who had posed as Temescal, the Thief of Cabazon, was now indeed outlaw, and desperate. Juan would have made distance his first friend — Mercado or no Mercado; yet he wisely hesitated to declare his intention of abandoning the hazard. Juan argued that, while war was his trade, he preferred a uniform and the sanction of conventional authority. It is no reflection upon his courage that he also preferred the safety of numbers. Thus Juan toyed with a half-formed resolve to seek new fortunes with the rebel army.

Their erstwhile sprightly pilgrimage had become a wild and sinister escapade, a forlorn adventure, a futile struggle to survive. The future offered nothing more promising than a blank adobe wall, a firing squad, and oblivion. Contemplating with vivid recollection such an inglorious climax to his career — Juan had variously officered firing squads himself — he became embittered toward the set of his fortunes. The mirror of his conscience showed him his own face traitorous to a friend. To avoid this scowling image of himself, he fixed his outward gaze on Temescal's broad back. Here was the huge offense, this Temescal, the aloof, the intolerant,

the obdurate, the unapproachable! What a lowering, ragged travesty of greatness! This bombo, this boastful talker, this paper bag of empty promises, clapped between one hand and the other, had burst! A captain-general, indeed! A captain-general of dread misfortune, poverty, distress! Provider for abandoned infants! Chihuahua! A fine patron — hatless, ragged, and wearing coarse shoes borrowed from a sheepherder! And who but a fool would leave good money with a priest? Of what consequence was Alejandro's fate when hunted men had need of food and shelter?

Juan's imagination beheld La Luz a nun, persuaded to the veil by the subtle, lean Anselmo. Set a cat to guard a canary! A sour smile touched the young soldier's lips. 'If I shall not have her, neither shall he.'

Juan's mumbling reached the quick ear of Pepito, who stared at him through the darkness and grimaced. Had Pepito known but half of what was in Juan's mind, he would have knifed him and laughed to see him fall. As it was, catching another faint vibration in the air, Pepito slipped from the saddle and put his ear to the ground. 'Two horses,' he said, approaching Temescal, and awkwardly imitating Mercado's manner of saluting.

Temescal made no acknowledgment, nor did he change his position, but sat on his horse, staring moodily into the night.

Juan gently loosened the pistol in his holster. 'Fear is dead in this Temescal,' he soliloquized. 'He would catch bullets in his teeth and chew them down like confetti.'

The dull sound of speeding hoofs rolled toward them.

It was as Pepito had said — two horsemen, one following the other with free rein.

The foremost drew up in front of Temescal. 'It is Mercado,' he said, saluting and gesturing toward his companion. 'My mozo thought he would like to try the life. Has he your permission to ride with us?'

'The horse he rides is worth the risk,' said Temescal.

'I speak for both.' Mercado waved his hand. 'When you know him, you will not part with him willingly.'

Temescal nodded, reined round, and, followed by the others, rode south across the bleak, chill mesa. Their goblin shadows danced with their pace, as the late moon, palely inquisitive, searched the uplands with a languid eye.

La Luz, the night wind cooling her hot cheeks, caught the smooth motion of the thoroughbred's stride. In the rush of their progress, in the sweep of the dim white road beneath the rhythmic hoofs, she forgot the strangeness of her new apparel, and whence it came; forgot to grieve that she had left her father thus, forgot her fear that when Temescal knew, he would forbid her journeying farther. In tune with the high spirit of the horse she rode, La Luz became enamoured of the night, the sentient stars, the pale, alluring moon, the wild, sweet incense of the desert wind, the hardy companionship of the taciturn Mercado. Perhaps the more because she realized the perilous future that would soon confront them. But what mattered when the end came, or how or where? Always, unto the end, was Temescal. His arms had held her and his lips had touched her lips to flame. He led — and whither she did not know or care, save that she ever followed Temescal.

When Temescal pulled his horse to a trot, and a thin dust rose round them, La Luz sneezed — and bumped as her horse trotted. The inner sides of her knees stung as though burned, where the unadjusted stirrup-leathers had chafed them. She bit her lip. Tears of vexation started to her eyes.

As the horses finally slowed to a walk, La Luz turned toward Mercado. 'My stirrups do not feel right,' she complained.

'Then adjust them, pollo,' said the old rural.

Mercado had dared to call her a 'fancy man' — she who had become a fighting-man and dared to follow Temescal.

'But I shall fix you!' she cried.

'Easy! Easy!' cautioned Mercado, laughing to disguise their quarrel. 'Don Ricardo has a keen ear. Keep your knife for slicing his bacon. And give your horse more rein or he will rear with you. He is no plough-horse to be manhandled by a petate.'

'You call me a petate? Mercado, I shall kill you!' whispered La Luz.

'That is quite possible, señora. But, first, you had better speak to Temescal about it. He needs me.'

La Luz flared up to the covert challenge like fire to a gust of wind. 'What can you do for him, that I cannot do? If need be, I can fight for him. I have my knife. And I can make the fire and cook his food, and wash his linen and also mend it. And I can make him laugh, because I am of the country and speak not as he speaks. And if he is killed, I shall not live to weep. Could you do more for him?'

'I could shine his boots on Sunday. You forgot that.

Of a truth, you have the heart, señora, but not the experience. I have had much experience in fighting. I have had four wives. Now I have none. So it is that I live a safe life.'

'Four! Did they all die?'

'If they didn't, they will, sometime. But they left the house first. One, she went to live with José Martinez of Calabasas. Another one, she went to work in a posada in the City of Mexico; the third, or maybe it was the fourth, ran away with — but it is no matter. My head breaks no more dishes. Now it is that I live a safe life. But you are not like those women. You are a good wife to Don Ricardo.'

'Twice you have called me "señora." But I am not his wife!'

'Easy! When you talk like that, the girl comes into your voice. Temescal has a quick ear. Halt now, and I will attend to your stirrups. Pretty soon we shall leave this road and you will need them.'

La Luz was glad to dismount and stretch her legs. Temescal's boots and the snug buckskin breeches annoyed and irritated her. As Mercado unlaced the stirrup-leathers, La Luz stepped close that she might watch and learn the process. Instantly Mercado left his task uncompleted, and went round to the other side of the horse and began to unlace the opposite stirrup-leather. La Luz followed him.

'Will you hold my horse till I finish this work?' said Mercado impatiently. Then, to himself, 'I have learned something. She has a little knife. I don't want it.'

Again upon the way, and briskly, that they might catch up with the others, Mercado held brief communion

with himself. As he had said, he had learned something. Aware that direct questioning would not discover the real La Luz, he had teased her to anger, and in its flame and subsiding glow he discerned — not Temescal's mistress, as he had imagined, but a maiden who, though tempestuous, willful, and daring, was, sin embargo, a good girl. Deliberately Mercado had addressed La Luz as 'señora' and 'good wife.' Her tone of surprised denial, almost of consternation, confirmed her innocence. Had she been merely Temescal's woman — so Mercado reasoned shrewdly — she would have accepted graciously the name of wife. Yet she had disclaimed it. Strangely enough, the old rural was pleased with his discovery. Yet his own tumultuous domestic experiences provoked him to distrust all women — married or otherwise. Moreover, he had stood at attention — literally — when, in Santa Rosalia, La Luz had boxed Captain Vaca's ears. Hence, Mercado had guarded his back against a possible thrust while adjusting the stirrups for La Luz. If, angered by a word, La Luz would box an officer's ears, what might she not do to a plain rural?

Refreshed by the brief relaxation and rest, as well as by an intuitive awareness that, in spite of his growling, Mercado was not unfriendly, La Luz became quite gracious to him, and he, proportionately distrustful. He preferred the literal threat — the hot splutter of anger. Yet he masked his distrust with a quaint sincerity of manner as La Luz asked many questions about Temescal's former office, his friends and his amours; for La Luz, with Latin directness, concluded that so great a man must have received much attention from the

ladies. Surprised that La Luz seemed to know so little about the Captain-General, his estate, his power, his affluence and popularity, Mercado shaped his answers into ultimate interrogations, which, like sickles, gleaned some further knowledge of La Luz, the soldado Juan, and Temescal's accidental association with her family. But when it came to the question — reiterated — of Temescal's amours, Mercado contrived a neat evasion.

'Who am I to speak of Don Ricardo's love affairs, when he himself could tell you, in much finer language, so much more about them?'

'But I shall never ask him!' declared La Luz.

'You are wiser than I thought. Learn to ride well, talk little, and use a rifle, and he may yet endure you among us.'

'But he will!' declared La Luz, her chin up and her eyes flashing, although this latter emphasis was lost in the darkness.

'Then he will!' Mercado shrugged his lean shoulders. Such a flame could not be extinguished by a breath or the wave of a hand! Nothing but shoveled earth, rude obsequies, a mound of stones . . . Mercado was diverted from this not unfamiliar picture by their abrupt departure from the road. Single-file they trailed across a rough stretch of wasteland which sloped gently toward the foothills of the great Sierra de Nayarit.

'We ride toward the west?' queried La Luz.

'And the hills, señorita. The valley for forage and loot — the hills for the hunted ladron,' hummed Mercado. 'I rode with Fulano de Tal, before I was caught. Then I became a rural. Otherwise I should have been made a dead one. Ai! And now I have become a ban-

dido again! Very soon it will be morning and we shall be in camp. Then you will no longer be my mozo. As Don Ricardo says, the wheel turns.'

'But always your friend, Señor Manuel.'

'Always is a long time. I bind myself to nothing.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

AMONG women — by choice not frequently — Mercado invariably assumed the aggressive as a first defense. Four several times he had been bound in holy matrimony, each instance terminating in a most unholy row. Hence, when La Luz had called herself his friend, he had shied like a mustang from a threatening loop, showing his heels and snorting to emphasize his freedom. 'I bind myself to nothing.'

Yet Mercado's declaration was uncalled for in that La Luz had been inspired by gratitude untainted by a thought of bargaining. And Mercado might as well have saved himself the onus of his ungallant attitude. He was already bound — firmly, because he did not know it; securely, because La Luz had not striven to bind him. Her fierce threat of retaliation when he had called her a 'pollo' — a ladies' man — the obvious sincerity of her intent to knife him when he had named her witless; the swift, supple bending of the flame as she disclosed her heart's supreme fidelity; her daring spirit, her inexperience, and the clean directness of her ardent questioning — these multicolored strands had bound Mercado, and thrice effectively because of her innocence.

Of course, the old rural growled. Stanch fighting dogs seldom whine affably or bark their delight. He muttered many proverbs, parrot-like, in his subsequent dark soliloquies as they approached the mountains.

Once among the rough foothills of the Nayarit, Mer-

cado led the way because of his knowledge of the country. It was then that Temescal reined aside to let the weary cavalcade pass. He followed, nor dreamed that the slender young horseman, garbed in the familiar costume of a rural, was La Luz of the green meadow. Some foolish youth, Mercado's friend . . . Temescal was occupied with a broader theme — the restoration of the President's lost prestige and power.

The rebellion was yet young, might be repulsed, its leader captured, imprisoned. This rebel leader was a visionary, a writer of books, an impractical and sentimental person, sincere enough, yet absurdly inadequate to govern the ignorant. Throw meat to a tame wolf, or shoot it, but never attempt to feed it from your hand. The President — that old warlock of Oaxaca — had understood his people! For over thirty years he had held them tame, thwarted insidious treasons, administered necessarily stern law, championed progressive ideals, converted foreign exploitation into national revenue. Meanwhile, his nation had become solidified, respected, prosperous. 'For more than thirty years!' mused Temescal. 'And ten of these, I served him. The wheel turns!'

The laboring horses, climbing the first long slope of the Nayarit, sniffed the faint incense of the upland pines, pricked curious ears, plodded determinedly. To Temescal, the dense, dim woodland in the hush of dawn seemed like a cavern peopled by a resentful company, each shadowy tree-trunk a silent enemy. Faint light explored the shadows, drew the trees apart. High on the naked crest of Nayarit a golden arrow lodged, quivered, and, burning softly on the cold, gray rock,

spread lateral radiances of faint, celestial fire. A thin, sweet bird-note shrilled far up the steep.

Like a great banquet hall, blue-roofed, its walls a circular palisade of pines, its green floor sprinkled with wild fleur-de-lis, the mountain meadow opened to their gaze. Mercado warned them from the cienega, its vivid mask a treacherous footing for the horses. Avoiding the edges of the slow, dark stream, they came to the farther side of the meadow. Juan, utterly spent, dismounted and dropped on the grass. He was instantly asleep. Mercado and Pepito attended to the horses. La Luz, who ached so that she had to bite her lip to keep from sobbing, found a fragrant bed beneath a gigantic pine, back from the meadow. Temescal, staggering toward another tree, tripped on a hidden root. 'But this will do,' he murmured as he fell. It is significant of his extreme exhaustion that he did not declare that he would sleep. Sleep seized him first.

Mercado, having suffered less recent emotion and physical stress — snuffing out Vaca's life had been a more or less agreeable exercise — fashioned hobbles from a piece of untwisted rope.

Finally he sauntered over to where La Luz was sleeping and spread his own faded sarape over her.

'A very pretty mozo,' he reflected. 'And there'll be a very pretty row when Temescal recognizes her. I would prefer that he have his coffee first.'

It is said that your bandido makes the best rural. Mercado had had such experience, in his younger days riding from the law, and later for the law. To revert to the old habit was not difficult. Mercado felt quite at home. The horses were provided for. That five hungry

folk would sooner or later want breakfast did not trouble him. He smoked a cigarette. He gathered together all the saddle-bags. Pepito watched him.

'Whose alforjas are these?' asked Mercado.

'The soldado's.' Pepito gestured toward Juan, who lay face-down upon the grass.

Mercado dumped the contents of the saddle-bags on a spot of bare earth beneath a pine.

'But I might have known it! Juan soldado was provisioned for a journey. A botella of aguardiente, unopened. Cigarrillos, six packages, and fosforos enough to light his way to perdition. A clean handkerchief, and new. Cartridges for his pistol. We can't eat these. Three buttons from the uniform of a teniente — nor these. Yet this bread and this dried corn — with these and the liquor, he was shrewd. A soldier with an unopened bottle of liquor within his reach for six long hours! I smell smoke!'

In the other saddle-bags Mercado discovered a miscellany of small personal effects, Temescal's torn and tattered notebook, the stub of a pencil, a small shaving-kit, a silver flask — empty.

Then came a coarse brown dress, tightly folded, and a blue sash of knitted wool. Pepito stared at the familiar garments and thought of La Luz. Mercado drew from Pepito's saddle-bags a faded denim blouse, a twist of tobacco, a short piece of twisted hair-rope, a butcher-knife. About to replace the blouse, which was rolled tight, Mercado hesitated and felt of it. He shook the blouse. Out tumbled a small, beautifully wrought cup of silver.

'I see you have been to Mass,' said Mercado. 'Where did you learn your trade, Don Sticky-Fingers?'

'I found it!' declared Pepito, nodding emphatically. 'There was also a bigger one — but I could not hide it in my shirt.'

'Next time you go to Mass, wear a bigger shirt. What will you do with this holy cup?'

'But I'll sell it and buy cartridges with which to fight!' said Pepito.

'You have the right idea. I'll take care of this cup. Don Ricardo has no patience with small thieves. But first I will try the mug.' And Mercado poured out a generous drink of the aguardiente and tossed it down. Half as much he proffered to Pepito. They munched some of the dried corn, thus contriving a perilous mixture, but economical. Fermentation would extend the influence of the liquor far beyond its ordinary course.

Replacing the scattered properties in the saddle-bags, Mercado glanced round the meadow, caught the hour from the slanting shadow of a tree. Observing that the horses grazed contentedly, he leaned back against a saddle and closed his eyes.

Pepito, who had conceived a wholesome respect and admiration for this little brown wasp of a fighting-man, stared adoringly at the other's sombrero, tipped at a rakish angle; at his huge, curving mustache, at his hawk-nose, his heavy black eyebrows. Mercado seemed to bristle as he slept. Or did he sleep? Pepito's eyes grew blurred. Mercado's image finally melted into the dark background of the forest. A mosquito, without the customary warning, settled on the herd-boy's nose. He brushed the mosquito off. Another assailed his ear. He slapped at it, now wide awake. He found Mercado staring at him like a weazel.

'Is it thus you guard the sleep of your master?'

'But I am awake, señor.'

'You call bacon, pig. Sit yonder by Don Ricardo and keep the mosquitoes from him with your hat. Thus you may keep awake. If I discover but one sting upon his face when he awakens, I'll tan you with my cuerta.'

Pepito obeyed sullenly. Yet, once at his task, he became enthusiastic. He not alone kept the mosquitoes from Temescal's face, but discouraged their industrious intentions by slapping his hat at all the swarms in the immediate vicinity. Interested in such unusual occupation, and awed by Temescal's regal snore, Pepito kept awake. The old rural sat motionless, his chin upon his chest. Only Mercado knew if Mercado slept.

Hours later, La Luz awakened, stretched and yawned like a healthy kitten. The air was indolent with the sun-warmed moisture of the cienega. La Luz lay gazing up at the glimmering needles of the pines. Slowly a dull ache of apprehension, of dread, assailed her like a wave of physical pain. Her body became suddenly hot, then cold. She glanced at her strange apparel. Rising, she drew the sarape about her shoulders. Kneeling above a shadowy pool among the trees, La Luz tucked up her sleeves, bared her smooth, brown throat, and thrusting her rounded arms beneath the cool, clear water, splashed it in her face, caught her breath — scrubbed vigorously. Rising, she shook the bright drops from her fingers and tossed back her tumbled hair. Her eager pulse responded ardently, enhancing the healthful, even color of her face with a rich, warm underglow. As old Mercado had remarked contemplatively, she was a very

pretty mozo. And, indeed, as she briskly smoothed her sleeves and buttoned the soft cuffs, not conscious, for the moment, of her self or her surroundings, she could easily have been mistaken for a handsome, vigorous youth, high-spirited, keen for the next adventure; a youth whose careless ardor ignored pedestrian wisdom, leaving his future to slow incurious Time and the Ultimate Accounting.

'Paf! But I should have washed it!' La Luz glanced down at the dark blotch in the breast of the silken shirt which had so recently been Captain Vaca's. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Turning toward the meadow, she beheld, but a few paces from her, the ragged figure of Temescal. Nor was there merely amazement in his eyes, emphasized by his hands' expressive accompaniment, but every inch of him, from his coarse heavy shoes to the handkerchief bound round his head, was tensely alive with speechless consternation.

La Luz, fear of his instant reproval tugging at her heart, faced his amazement with bright, questioning eyes — in his discerning no flicker of anger, no scorn, no cheap astonishment, nor yet rebuke — only a barrier, like a dark, stagnant stream, its depths unreadable, its surface reflecting no other image than herself. As his amazement slowly subsided, the shadow deepened in Temescal's eyes, which, betraying neither warmth nor coldness, read her story in her presence there, her strangely becoming garments — that it should be Vaca's uniform!

Had he but censured her! Provoked that he did not speak either in greeting or in terse reproof, La Luz

straightway trampled her hesitation underfoot. Perhaps ancient Lilith's heritage inspired her. Her voice was low and clear and strangely impersonal.

'One came singing to our home in the green meadow. I fetched him wine, and, with my father, made him welcome. Yet he came uninvited. So I —' La Luz hesitated, watched Temescal's right hand — clenched like a stone.

'Had I but dreamed of this . . .' Temescal brushed his hand across his eyes. His arm dropped to his side, his fist again clenched, and even tighter.

'You would have left me — had me remain shut up in that dark church, with my father. But I have left him — to be with you, Don Ricardo.'

'Yet I was right!' declared Temescal. 'I could not subject you to these hardships, the desperate nights, the rigor of wild forays and retreats, the risk of capture, of sickness, of death, or a circumstance even more horrible. I had gone, cherishing your beauty as an unspoiled treasure; mine, yet in the keeping of a kindlier fate. Though I was tempted, there being a priest between us, I could not steal you from your father.'

'I am here.'

Temescal shook his head like a bull stung by a banderillo placed with exactness, and, withal, deep. And, like a tortured bull, he sheered from the threat of still another dart, yet swung about to watch his tormentor, with burning eyes.

'And last night I did not know you! Yet you passed me so near at one time that I could have touched your hand! If I had known . . .'

'Yet it was Mercado who made my stirrups the

proper length,' declared La Luz. 'That was after I had quarreled with him. I like him now.'

'Ah, yes! Mercado! I shall talk with him.'

'But I would talk with you first, Don Ricardo. It is that you are outlaw. You need fighting-men. You need those who will be faithful to you. You would not take me with you, but you would take the soldier Juan, and Mercado and Pepito. And yet I am more faithful than your Juan, I have more sense than your Pepito, and I have as much courage as Mercado. In the corridor of the fonda did you not say, "Until the fight is ended, golden one"? And the fight has but begun. Are you not outlaw, and a hunted man? And did you not mean, forever, when you kissed me?'

'Ai, God! Here is my fight!' cried Temescal.

'And did I fear, when, crossing the plain of El Gata in the night, I rode with you? Or, in the morning when the bandidos came, and you sent me, on your horse, to lead my family across the mountains? Do I weep when I cut my finger? Do I complain when I am weary, or make myself a burden to you — although once I did fall asleep on your shoulder; but I could not help that, Temescal.'

'A burden! But, no!' Temescal's hand relaxed, until a twinkle of light showed between his fingers. La Luz had often unconsciously studied her father's hand, gripping a firm refusal or relinquishing a slow assent. Unconsciously she watched the hand of Temescal. She drew back her final arrow — a keen, feminine shaft — and let fly. 'And see' — her voice trembled between laughter and tears, even as Temescal's mind trembled between surrender and defiance — 'did I not cut off my hair with a knife, that I might follow you?'

'Santa Maria Purissima! I surrender!' cried Temescal. 'Thus to mutilate the glory of your hair with a knife! Had you said shears, I doubt if the edge would have touched me. But a knife! My golden one! But you have struck home to my heart! The past is a spent storm, its muttering dies away in the far, unremembering hills. To-day is the challenge, and the bright enemy! Here is your haven of forgetfulness!' And Temescal would have gathered the tense, slender figure in his arms. But Lilith — as in the ancient garden — whispered a subtlety.

'I follow, and obey — but only as your mozo, Temescal.'

'Quite so! My mozo.' Temescal straightened his shoulders as though he had suffered a most unanticipated buffet in the eye. 'My mozo,' he reiterated — to strengthen the sagging interlude of recovery. And then, 'My mozo will immediately heat water that I may shave, and while I shave, my mozo will wash my shirt — and also his. But first fetch me my saddle-bags.'

'It is thus that I would serve you,' declared La Luz, and passing Temescal swiftly, she came into the glaring sunlight of the meadow. Near the saddles sat Juan, Mercado, and Pepito. Mercado nodded and turned a mustache tip. Pepito stared, nor closed his mouth to the flies. Juan uttered a soldierly expletive, would have said something in astonished greeting, but observing, beyond La Luz, the ragged figure of Temescal, his back against a tree and his arms folded, Juan but contrived a meaning glance, a sneer, including both La Luz and Don Ricardo.

CHAPTER XXIX

THERE are pages in the little, tattered notebook that was Temescal's — and is now in the jealous keeping of his friend — which are all but illegible. Some of these could hardly be called pages or leaves, but rather shreds of paper, stained, wrinkled, and disclosing here and there a phrase chewed in two by a bullet; an observation beheaded, a dimension de-tailed, a penciled map disrupted — these exigencies, and the discount of translation, discomfit both the native theme and its most willing but unskillful advocate. Again, there were occasions when Temescal, questioned, declined to bridge a gap in the notes, but talked his way around it in subtle digressions. Moreover, the notes are in Spanish, often colloquial jottings which tempt the imagination toward pleasant but inconsequential meanderings far from the broad middle course of Temescal's adventuring.

When Temescal was persuaded to review the manuscript, he sighed prodigiously as he read, and finally, relieved, no doubt, to have done with his task, wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. 'Let it ride!' he said with noble tolerance; which was truly a concession, because he would rather have said, 'Bury it!'

Hence there are occasions when that which happened can only be surmised through that which preceded or came after the circumstance. Just what Mercado said to Juan, following his surprise at the appearance of La Luz in the mountain camp, is not on record. No doubt the old rural said enough.

In the Sierra de Nayarit the long sunlight of late after-

noon dappled the mountain meadow with dark patches of shadow and golden filigrees of light. Temescal, shaven, his shirt washed and mended, sat watching La Luz clean a pair of dusty riding-boots. To be exact, he was aware that she was cleaning the boots, but his gaze was fixed upon her firm, trim ankles and the sandals laced upon her feet. One might have imagined that he was thinking of nothing else, yet he was listening to Mercado, who sat opposite with a loaf of bread, a bottle of aguardiente, and a little heap of dried corn spread upon his sarape. Removed from these were several packets of cigarettes, a handful of matches, some loose cartridges, and three buttons from the uniform of a lieutenant.

'This,' observed Mercado, waving his hand, 'I found in his alforjas. And yet, Captain Temescal, when you asked for food for us all, he answered nothing, but offered to ride down into the valley and buy provisions for us. Buy from whom? The rabbits? There is no store within six hours of us.'

'What further proof?' asked Temescal.

'His face!' cried Mercado, thrusting his crooked thumb toward Juan, who stood a few paces away, sullenly resentful, self-conscious and defiant.

'He suffers from a wound,' said Temescal.

'But not that in his shoulder,' declared Mercado. 'I am for giving him the ley fuga.'

'You are for doing what you are told to do,' said Temescal. 'Juanito, what of all this?'

'I say nothing.'

'No defense, no explanation, Juanito mio?'

'How can I explain that which is not?'

'Easily. In this instance subtract that which might have been from that which is. But we shall not argue. We needed food, and you had none, until Mercado discovered your provisions. A strange circumstance, my friend. That you hate me seems evident.'

La Luz glanced up, and as quickly veiled her glance. Temescal gazed, rather sadly, upon Juan.

'All this aside,' he said, with a sweep of his arm, 'and Mercado and Pepito and La Luz, aside, which leaves but you and me and the horses. Accident made us companions for a while. Distress and danger made us — I thought — firm friends. It seems that a woman has made of us enemies. That is exact. I love a wholesome enemy. And it behooves a victor to be generous. And so, now that you have declared your intention of abandoning me, expressing a proper grief at my misfortunes, and confessing so frankly and regretfully that you find no further pleasure in my company, I let you go.'

'But I have not said a word . . .'

'A thousand — with your eyes, your attitude. Must I dissect you before my friends? I think I must. Stand to it, then, if not for your sake, at least for mine. A man's friends are his representatives. Loyalty, affection, unselfishness — these foundlings I discovered in your heart and would have nourished. That I have failed is undoubtedly my fault. Even so, Adam, I think, was a disappointment to his Maker. In trying to shape you, I moulded with too liberal a hand for the scant material. I visioned an ideal soldier. I stripped the glittering armor from a Mars and found a mercenary. And that, Juanito, means a paid fighter, a profiteer of death, an automaton of murder, as soulless as a machine-

gun. He who kills and hates not the man he kills is twice a murderer. You would serve advancement under any flag. Do so — but at least be loyal to your wage. That which you are was not determined by your parents, or theirs, or theirs beyond them. And not because of your service to me — once, indeed, you saved my life — but because of that which you are, and blamelessly, I let you go. I give you your freedom, your horse, your arms, and half the gold I carry. Such was the bargain of our companionship. You have the power to betray me and my little strength. I do not overlook that. And, further, because you would serve a cause captained by a man who was once my friend, I shall give you a note to him. The writing may lend you some prestige, for this reason. Once, in Guadalajara, I saved him from the knife of a mad assassin. My then friend, fresh from an American college, walked with me to the Calle de los Soldados, careless of his voice, expounding democracy. "All men are equal," he said, just as the assassin attacked him. "But not equal to all occasions," I told him as I shot the assassin. The killing made my then friend sick to his stomach, and spoiled our discussion. Yet, recovered somewhat, he told me that, while we should never agree politically, should I need a favor and it were his to grant, he would not fail me. And so I shall write a little note to him which you may deliver.'

'I carry no messages to Ciudad Juarez,' declared Juan sullenly.

'Thanks for your courtesy. You have informed me liberally. I had quite another city and another man in mind. Pepito, catch the lieutenant's horse, saddle him, and make haste. Our friend grows weary of us.'

'I can attend to my own horse,' said Juan.

'Not while you are my guest. Mercado, replace the things in this stranger's saddle-bags and see that not even one button is missing.'

'The good liquor also, Captain?'

'The good liquor also, little Manuel.'

'And I took but one drink!' Mercado sighed lugubriously as he gathered up Juan's effects.

Meanwhile, Temescal counted out half of his money. La Luz deplored this as sentimental extravagance. To give away a handful of gold — and to a traitor — when they had need of every shining hidalgo! When Temescal himself was hatless, coatless, in rags! That her man should be so foolish!

'Ricardo,' she whispered, 'you but help him who would harm you.'

'Let Judas hug his sack,' said Temescal. 'I have always pitied Judas.'

'You are a strange man,' declared La Luz. 'When you are hungry, you think hard and forget your hunger. When I am hungry, I am cross.'

'You are evidently hungry. And you forget that you are my mozo. Yet a little while, and we shall have food.' Temescal turned to Juan. 'Our bargain,' he said and proffered the handful of gold.

'But I shall not take your money. I'll get along without it.'

'So? Then we must make an exchange. You have a morral of corn which Mercado secured for your horse. You shall sell it to me for ten hidalgos. Take the money and give me the corn. Or had you rather bargain with Mercado?'

'You make me take it,' said Juan.

'You are wise. I have tied my patience to a brittle bush. Pepito has saddled your horse. Ride north if you would succeed — south if you seek disaster. Farewell, soldier!'

'But, señor —'

'I might have known you would say that.' Temescal turned away, faced La Luz. 'A flat rock, a round stone, and this corn, and we shall have tortillas. There is water to drink. Pepito, a fire! Mercado! What? Hasn't the stranger left? Mercado!'

'A minute, Captain! This is a personal matter.' Old Mercado had drawn a peso from his pocket and was proffering the coin to Juan and demanding the bottle of liquor. 'You will sell it to me for a peso, and pronto!' said Mercado. 'Take it, and give me the liquor. Or had you rather bargain with señor pistola?'

Juan, more fearful of Mercado than he could ever have been of Temescal, delivered over the bottle.

'You are wise!' declared Mercado in the Temescalian manner. 'But didn't you overlook my change? I have an hidalgo coming. Would you cheat me?'

'You give me a dollar and ask ten in change?' cried Juan. And he appealed to Temescal. 'Is it thus you allow me to be robbed? If that is your game, take all, and then shoot me in the back as I ride away. You have me.'

'Softly, young soldier! Consider. You appeal to Temescal, who is an outlaw, and a stranger. You ask him for justice, and then insult him. You also insult my follower, when you imply that he is so slow with a gun that he must wait until your back is turned to kill you.

I know nothing of the argument between you. You face Mercado. You are armed. If you cannot conclude the argument otherwise — fight it out!'

La Luz, noting the desperation in Juan's eyes, stepped in between the glaring enemies. 'But do not kill him, Mercado. I am tired of this talk and quarreling. Let Juan soldado go, that I may grind the corn and make tortillas.'

'He owes me the change for my peso. I shall have it.'

'Give me the money he demands,' said La Luz, turning to Juan.

Juan paid the shot, flushing hotly. He mounted his horse, swung round and rode across the meadow.

'Mercado, that you may not be a thief, I shall keep the money,' declared La Luz.

'Well, I have the liquor, anyway,' grumbled Mercado.

'But no cup,' said Temescal, mocking their poverty of equipment.

'But, yes, Captain. I have one!' And presently the old rural proffered to his captain a silver cup filled with stinging aguardiente.

Temescal turned the beautiful cup in his fingers, studied it. 'This is a valuable piece.' He smelt of the liquor, tasted it. 'But I do not like this pilfering from the Church.' He drank the liquor.

'Me pilfer from the Church!' cried Mercado. He filled the cup and drank, licked his long mustache and smacked his lips. 'No more than I would steal from my great-grandmother, who is in heaven. I won the cup at dice. The fellow who lost it may have stolen it. But I came by it honestly. Another taste, Captain?'

'No more. And thank you for the refreshment. What are you staring at, boy?'

Pepito, kneeling to make a fire, had witnessed the drinking. He straightway crossed himself. Fear — not conscience — troubled him.

'At nothing, señor.'

'Quite so.' Temescal shrugged. 'Even a stupid mozo recognizes the quality of the chalice. He stared at it — crossed himself. I am no churchman, yet I respect his act.'

'So do I!' declared Mercado stoutly. 'The boy's devotions have profited him something, no?'

But Temescal was absorbed in listening to the steady thump of the stone as La Luz crushed the corn to flour. So had the ancestral women of her race ground corn for tortillas — how many thousand years? Temescal hummed an ancient, all-but-forgotten song, 'Those Who Grind Corn.' Mercado, his hunger numbed by the strong liquor, smiled as he listened. His Indian mother had often sung the song. But how did Don Ricardo Rayon happen to know the tune?

CHAPTER XXX

SOUTH, down the broad valley, four horsemen rode at an easy pace, following the laggard progression of the road along the foothills of the Sierra de Nayarit. Late afternoon left the slope of the range sunless, the road in shadow, the air pleasantly cool. In spite of their relaxation there was that about the horses and riders which suggested long hours of vigorous and purposeful travel. Even Armigo, the sheepherder, with whom the four had taken breakfast that morning, was aware that they were engaged in a venture which his curiosity had best not question. They had not robbed him, no! Rather, the big man who bargained for their breakfast had actually paid in advance for the entertainment — and in gold! Of a truth, such liberality, and from a ragged purse, would have been suspicious had it not been so surprisingly munificent. In fact, the big man's liberality seemed even to have surprised one of his companions, a slender, handsome youth, who remonstrated, saying: 'Half would be too much!' At which the big one had shrugged his shoulders. 'It would,' he had said, 'had the shepherd the half of it in change, or could protect himself. And perhaps he has a daughter.' Strange words, and a strange and watchful company — the one whom they called Mercado being especially vigilant. No sooner were they departed from his camp when the shepherd Armigo tried the coin with his teeth — and found it gold. He thanked the Saints for having sent the adventurers to his fire.

Temescal

Having accomplished some thirty miles of travel, with the pueblo of Ocotan visible against the low hills rounding the southern end of the valley, Temescal employed a waiting pace, that darkness might befriend his next bold enterprise.

Approaching a bend in the meandering road, which left the valley floor reluctantly to wind among the ridges, the travelers drew rein. The pueblo, as ancient and as natural as the rocks, lay in an emerald hollow of the hills. The brown walls, the low roofs, the occasional window-panes, were touched with the faint red haze of sunset.

Far from the railroad, and all but unknown, Ocotan knew but few visitors — an occasional American prospector, a chance enthusiast searching for the picturesque, or some nameless refugee.

'A comfortable village, for a poor man,' observed Mercado, stroking his hawk-nose and eyeing Temescal above his knuckles.

'Let us see how comfortable, Mercado. A poor man may at least shake hands with wealth. According to the tax records, there is one living here who is worth a million pesos — a retired official, who finds the climate healthful. I would feel his pulse.'

'He may need bleeding,' suggested the old rural.

'I'll talk with him. You, Mercado, will accompany me. La Luz, Pepito, there is grass and water along yonder stretch of hillside. Wait for us there. Do not unsaddle the horses, but let them graze.'

'You are for another fight, Temescal?'

'But, no. Keep from the road. The quail are going to roost. I shall be back before they are asleep.'

It pleased La Luz to salute Captain Temescal — she had caught the trick from Mercado — in a brisk, soldierly fashion. But it did not please her that she needs must bite her lip and blink her eyes to keep back the tears. She was vexed by Temescal's curt manner, his do-as-I-bid-you attitude, his brusque acknowledgment of this or that duty which she performed. Above all, she was vexed that she could make no great sacrifice for him, do nothing but obey and play the mozo. Moreover, La Luz was hungry, more tired than she cared to acknowledge to her pride, and one of her ankles was sadly chafed by the tight riding-boot. Inaction now emphasized the burning pain. Dusk subdued her high spirit. She thought of her father in the cloisters of San Marcos.

'But you are a lively mozo!' Pepito declared mockingly, as they rode toward the green spot on the gentle slope. 'The great one would laugh if he could see your face. It is like the face of a sheep chewing a bitter weed. No wonder he would not take you along with him.'

It needed but this bucolic gallantry to break the slender thread of her restraint; yet La Luz did not fly into a temper. Her emotions — the accumulation of the past, few, perilous days — found relief in quick, hot tears. Blindly she dismounted, dropped the reins, and flung herself, face-down, upon the grass. Pepito laughed, scoffed at what he determined was her weariness, boasted of his endurance, striving to evoke some sharp retort. He liked to quarrel with La Luz. The flame of her temper thrilled him.

'You are nothing but a girl, for all your grand clothes!' he mocked.

La Luz, her face close to the warm earth, sobbed unheedingly.

Pepito had never known her to cry like that. Indeed, she must be suffering! He became interested, a bit frightened, even solicitous. 'Did you hurt yourself, little sister?' he asked, awed by her unusual display of emotion.

La Luz made no reply, save to shake her head petulantly, and sob the harder.

'But you must be sick! I think it is that you are dizzy from the sun. I will get fresh water.'

Leaving his horse to graze, Pepito explored the dusk. The water in their canteens long since had become tepid. His lip sagging, and sniffing like a dog, the shepherd boy made his way up the slope, discovered the spring that fed the green below, and presently returned with cool water in the two canteens.

La Luz had arisen, was stroking the velvet muzzle of the black thoroughbred.

'But I thought you were weeping!' Pepito exclaimed in a rather disappointed tone.

'Did you find water?'

'Here it is.'

'You might have led the horses to drink. You are thoughtless.'

'I'll take mine to the spring. You can take your own, cheater!'

'Cheater?' La Luz turned swiftly.

'First you weep' — and Pepito imitated the sound of sobbing, with malicious accuracy — 'and then you tell me that I am thoughtless, and your voice is like a sharp knife.'

'It is the pain in my ankle. You are a good boy to fetch the cool water. I shall bathe my ankle and put out the fire.'

'Fire? I wish we had some frijoles and bread. I am weak in the middle,' declared Pepito.

'Take the horses to the spring, or Captain Temescal will beat you when he returns.'

'He will not beat me.'

'But he will! If you do not go, I shall tell him to beat you.'

'Then I think it is that I will go,' said Pepito reluctantly.

Refreshed by these brotherly and sisterly amenities, La Luz next bathed her ankle and bound it with a strip of coarse cotton handkerchief, soaked in the cool water; but she found herself unable to draw the close-fitting boot over the bandage.

'But I shall wear my sandals,' she told herself, awaiting Pepito's return. 'And Temescal shall not know that I have wept.'

The quail, huddled in the branches of the hillside junipers, disturbed the silence with an occasional fluttering, and a low, plaintive cheeping, quite unlike the querulous 'Quidado' of their daylight hours.

Though unfamiliar with the village of Ocotan, Temescal knew it as he knew a thousand other such villages — its single, straggling street, its picturesque irregularity, its squalor, filth, and general out-at-elbow-ness. Originally the hacienda of a great patron whose grant embraced broad miles of valley land and timbered hills, Ocotan had dwindled to a slatternly pueblo — a brown and withered crone crouching above the ashes of ancient

memories. Remained but one living ember of her earlier fame — Don Antonio Lopez, descendant of the original patron, and disgruntled heir to an insignificant fraction of the once great estate — a mere ten thousand acres. Of these the pueblo occupied a space. His own hacienda stood removed from the village, on a higher plot and plane, isolate in its feudal austerity.

Superstitiously fearful of the night air, the inhabitants of Ocotan closed their doors — and windows if they had them — against the approach of night. Hence Temescal and the vigilant Mercado rode up a dim street, the darkness an advantage in that it served to set apart the broad, low casa of Don Antonio, with its long front of lighted windows, from the shapeless, shadowy huddle of roofs below.

Mercado held the horses. Temescal approached the wide portal, cleared his throat, knocked vigorously. The Indian woman who opened the door stared and stepped back a pace. Temescal promptly accompanied her startled movement by stepping forward. He closed the door, announced himself soundingly, and surveyed the spacious and richly furnished room, all in a breath, as it were. The long pier-glass with its ornate and gilded frame, the glittering crystal pendants of the chandelier, the rich curtains and portières, broad-striped in green and gold, the fragile chairs of unsubstantial elegance, the oval center-table topped with onyx. . . 'Nor Spanish, nor French, nor good, plain Mexican,' reflected Temescal, as the Indian woman vanished.

Don Antonio Lopez, provoked that a stranger should dare disturb him while he dined — the Indian woman had announced 'a wild stranger' — entered the room,

his napkin in his hand, a morsel of boiled chicken in his mouth, and menace in his manner. That one should dare knock so peremptorily upon *his* door! And — beholding Temescal's uncouth attire — a peon!

'Would you shake my house down with your knocking!' he spluttered.

'If necessary,' replied Temescal, quite unruffled. 'Yet I may not find it necessary. That will depend altogether upon you, Don Antonio.'

The satirically affable intonation, the courtly manner — in contrast to the uncouth outer man — smoothed the hot arrogance from Don Antonio's round, fat face, untangled the puckered lines of his not-too-ample forehead, and ironed the sneer from his mouth. His stare became intently curious -- a flicker of remembrance quickening the blank mask with sudden and superficial affability.

'But it cannot be Ricardo Rayon! And in distress? I thought it was — that is, it has been rumored that you were dead.'

'I don't believe a word of it. You have a good memory for faces, Don Antonio, though not so good a memory for figures. But conclude your dinner. I shall be glad to wait.'

'You have dined?'

'Sumptuously — on anticipation. I accept the formality — but I must decline the plate itself. My men wait for me. They have not had supper; and it would be an imposition to ask you to feed twenty hungry rurales.'

'Rurales? And twenty! You must have serious business hereabouts.'

'I have. If you will excuse yourself to your family, perhaps we may conclude our visit promptly.'

'I dine alone, Don Ricardo. My wife is in Guadalajara.'

'She is to be congratulated. Allow me to offer you a chair. Your color is not good. Make yourself at home, Don Antonio. Consider yourself my guest, for, briefly, I am here to arrest you — my sad but imperative duty.'

'Arrest me! But this is an outrage! What have I done?'

'Too much — and not enough. Too much in that you have a substantial interest in the rebellion which now threatens Mexico. My office has had evidence of this for many months. And not enough, because there is charged against you on the tax records a matter of some several thousand pesos delinquent, or, rather, just taxes evaded in past years by misrepresentation and bribery. There is no need of further argument. You know the facts, as I know them.'

'But I can explain!' quavered Don Antonio, wiping his face with the napkin. 'The records will show that the present northern boundary of my estate includes nothing but —'

'Treason, Don Antonio, and nothing else. You speak of taxes and evade the great offense. Do not mistake me. I am an unofficial arbiter. Pay to me in hand five thousand pesos, for which I shall give you a receipt. Frankly, those whom I serve need money. This I want in oro nacional — not paper.'

'But I have not so much gold in my possession! I . . .'

'I shall take it in billetes de banco, then. Or, if you

prefer, we shall ignore the matter of taxes, and I shall turn you over to my lieutenant. I have business elsewhere.'

'But, Don Ricardo, my friend! I am no rebel! Political enemies have maligned me. You would not allow me to be assassinated?'

'Not for a moment! My rurales administer law. They are not bandidos.'

'But, General! I implore you —'

'You have finally reached my title. That is amusing. One more little effort and you may find the money. Otherwise —'

'But wait!' cried Don Antonio, mopping his bald head with the crumpled napkin, 'I shall call my majordomo. If I must buy my life —'

'Do so. I shall call my lieutenant. He does my killing for me.'

Don Antonio's sleek face became the color of a faded yellow glove. He was only too well aware of the ley fuga — the law of the fugitive — as an efficient means of obliterating political offenders.

'Perhaps,' he quavered, 'it will not be necessary to call in any witnesses to this transaction. These servants are apt to see too much, and talk among themselves. My reputation . . . this rebellion . . . scandal. . .'

'Are woven round your neck. I hold the slack of the rope.'

'But I haven't one centavo on my person! I never carry money about with me,' whined Don Antonio.

'Quite so. It is not a safe proceeding. Thus far I have ignored your weak evasions. But now you insult my intelligence. I shall ask you to spread the napkin on this

table. You play with it too much when you talk. Disgorge, little fat man! Sweat gold for Temescal.'

'But, General! this is robbery!'

'Impossible! You have not one centavo upon your person. Empty your pockets!'

Don Antonio groaned as he tossed a fat wallet upon the outspread napkin. Next he laid down his watch, his pen-knife, several keys, his gold-rimmed eye-glasses, some loose silver, a cigarette-case, and last a gold pencil with a diamond set in its top.

Temescal viewed the glittering trinkets on the white napkin, glanced up at Don Antonio's pallid face, shrugged his broad shoulders. He picked up the carved leather wallet, its corners bound with tiny arcs of engraved silver. He shook a sheaf of bank-notes from it, counted them, and, to Don Antonio's amazement, laid a few of the bank-notes on the table, pocketing the rest.

'Your change, Don Antonio — above five thousand. I shall give you a receipt.'

'Then you will not arrest me?' queried Don Antonio.

'I looked for a scorpion and found a snail. Here is your receipt, on the back of your own card. Save it, Tonito! Treasure it, Tonito! Read it often, Tonito!' and Temescal thrust the card in Don Antonio's unwilling hand.

Striding toward the door, Temescal caught a glimpse of himself in the tall mirror at the end of the room. His rags accused him. He stopped as though stricken, turned, and again faced Don Antonio. 'Don Ricardo Rayon, Captain-General of Rurales, visited you. Temescal the bandido bids you farewell.'

As Temescal turned again to go, a sneer crept across

Don Antonio's pallid face. His eyes bulged. A surge of color swept up to his forehead. Whipping a shining revolver from his pocket, he fired blindly at Temescal's broad back.

'Take that, bandido!' he cried.

Crashing above the shot came yet another — but from the long French window at the end of the room. Don Antonio clutched at his side, staggered back into his chair, and sat staring horribly at the empty doorway.

Mercado stepped back from the window, sprang to the corner of the house, and ran to Temescal, who, standing upon the lower step of the approach, seemed dazed as though by bullet shock.

'Are you hit, Captain?' cried Mercado.

'I think not. But the bullet whispered a name in my ear.'

'You turned your back on him twice! Are you loco? I got him from the window. That would be one of the women. She wails like a Yaqui. Quick, Captain! The horses are over here.'

'But there is no need for such haste, Mercado. The thing is done. The town's alcalde, magistrado, jefe politico, and established autocrat, sit in one chair, staring at that which we cannot see. He is dead. Why run from him? Who else is there even to question us?'

'As you please, Captain. If we are not to run from him, yet I would like to run toward a dinner.'

'You have an appetite?'

'Two, Captain. One left over from yesterday.'

'But you are a seasoned hand, Mercado.'

'Of a truth, I didn't learn my trade in a convent.'

'No. But rather in a cemetery. Here, take this, and buy food for us, and corn for the horses.'

In the village below, Mercado knocked at the first door along the street, which, following a murmuring of voices within the room, was opened hesitantly. A timid villager showed his head. The old rural bargained for provisions, and demanded change for the bank-note he presented.

Temescal, sitting his horse directly behind Mercado, reproved him. 'Are you one who would give alms and ask for change? Shoulder the sack, and give the fellow his money.'

And so Mercado and the Captain Temescal rode out of Ocotan and into the night, to find the shadowy figures of Pepito and La Luz close to the horses, waiting expectantly.

'But you are safe!' exclaimed La Luz. 'Pepito said he heard a shot, up there above the town.'

'A door slammed by the wind,' said Mercado.

'It was a very big door, then,' declared Pepito, shaking his head.

'Let the mozo take the sack on his horse,' ordered Temescal.

'We ride from here?' — and La Luz frowned in the dark.

'And now,' said Temescal.

South down the dim road, and far beyond the town of Ocotan, La Luz, perplexed by Temescal's heavy mood, his silence — and no doubt inspired by curiosity — crowded her horse between Mercado's and Temescal's.

'If you can't manage that horse —' began Mercado; but La Luz was not to be turned from her purpose.

'I would talk with Temescal about — his boots.'

'It would seem that you wear them,' muttered the old rural, falling behind.

'What happened, Ricardo?'

Temescal started as though awakened suddenly. 'Why, nothing worth mentioning. A tarantula would have struck me, but Mercado put his heel on it and crushed it.'

'That is good. Sometimes I like Mercado.'

'One of mine. A stout companion.'

'You are angry with me?' queried La Luz.

'With you? But, never, my golden one!'

'That is good, because, if you are not angry that I ride beside you, I shall never again ride behind. Mercado can take the dust.'

'So?'

'Yes. And because a mozo should not ride beside his patron, I shall no longer be your mozo. I shall be your lieutenant, Ricardo.'

'But you amuse me! What next?'

'And, being your lieutenant, I shall take care of the money. Your hand opens too easily. I shall pay a just price for that which we need; but I shall not scatter gold and expect it to grow like alfaleria seed.'

'Indeed! When did you fashion all these new ideas?'

'They are not new. I have been saving them.'

'I salute you! But what have I to say to all this? Have you considered my side of it?'

'Ciertamente! And that is why you will say "yes."'

'God! What an argument!' murmured Temescal.

'And as for your boots—' La Luz paused, and glanced down at her bandaged ankle. 'They —'

'My boots! What next? You jump from the head to the feet with amazing agility.'

'I have tied them on my saddle. One of them rubbed the skin off my ankle. So I bound it up, and now I wear my sandals. They are much cooler.'

'Por Dios, but you are unanswerable! Had you said a blistered heel or toe, it would not have burned me. But your ankle! That is a smooth perfection that should not be marred. You contrive the most unexpected delights, surprises, allurements — out of nothing. You are my lieutenant. Ride beside me — forever. And here are the delinquent taxes which I chose to collect for my Government. Stow them in a safe place, because, while gold falls, paper money flies. And the Saint of the Harvest bless you for a thrifty muchacha.'

'I am no muchacha: I am a woman!'

'I can quite believe it,' said Temescal.

CHAPTER XXXI

RAIDING from Zacatecas to Leon, wrecking and looting a trainload of arms and ammunition at Aguas Calientes, lifting a band of some fifty horses from the rancho of Francisco Aguilar — whose hacienda favored the Northern rebels — making quick beef of the cattle in the Cañon Soledad, foraging to right and left down the great plateau, yet ever with one destination in mind, Temescal flamed like a wild comet on toward Mexico — the mother city, and his last hope of restitution.

A strange way to go about it? Not so strange in such a land and in such precarious days. Zapata harassed the South. In the North, Pancho had fought some eighty battles with the rurales and had not been conquered. Compacts were worthless. Rifles were of much value. A dead enemy was as good a friend as any. Temescal, his name a war-gong to the peons, who, though against the Government, trusted him, recruited as he rode. Yet he chose his men. It was rumored that many dissatisfied rurales joined his company. This has not been proved. However, it is known that he commanded an active force of eighty brisk fighting men, each mounted, equipped, and excellently armed. Of these, Manuel Mercado of Zacatecas captained forty, who called themselves 'Mercado's Rurales' and wore the rural uniform.

Among Temescal's bandidos — and they were nothing else — each had some friend in the valley ranchos, in the hills, or in this or that town. These were the silent

army, employed as messengers, sentinels, scouts, purveyors of provisions, mendicant spies — and, knowing Mercado's sanguinary rule of thumb, as assassins, in several unrecorded instances. It may be said that, all told, Temescal commanded and controlled a thousand recruits — a tidy and flexible army, which worked in the dark as often as in the daylight, and, perhaps, more efficiently.

Encamped in Oro, below San Juan del Teul, a river north of him and a river south, with his barricade the eyebrow of a mountain range that encloses the valley at its southern end, and the Sierra de Nayarit some thirty miles behind him, Temescal rested upon such laurels as he had snatched, but meanwhile gathered fresh leaves for future coronals. And these were of paper and gratuitous — letters that came to him through devious byways and nameless hands — one from the rebel leader in the North, dispatched from Juarez; another from Chihuahua, where a shrewd peon, popular among his kind, recruited a formidable force of brainless patriots whose trade was banditry. And still another letter came from the South, from the City of Mexico — a conventional document on the face of it, yet containing a suggestion which outweighed all the other communications, in proffering not alone assistance, but substantial remuneration for services to be discussed in a proposed secret conference. This letter included a great and familiar signature, which Temescal studied earnestly. 'It is the same,' he said, holding the letter from him to catch the general character of the script, 'yet, somehow, the life has gone out of it.'

Established that a fig-tree is a vine, Temescal sat be-

neath his — temporarily — own vine and fig-tree, a spacious, cool, and verdant canopy of broad leaves shading a round plot of ground some hundred feet across. Against the gray and massive trunk of this historic vine was a low table — on it a jarro of wine, a small cup of beautifully engraved silver, a few cigarrillos, and the letters he had been reading. That Temescal used his revolver as a paper-weight was possibly more a matter of accident than of deliberation. His household effects were necessarily of an economic character.

Back of the fig-tree ran the low, brown wall of a small adobe, the erstwhile modest retreat of one of Temescal's men, vacated that the captain might occupy it as his headquarters. There were one or two larger and more comfortable houses in Oro, yet none of these included such a cool, arcadian anteroom as that in which Temescal took his ease. Beyond the deep shadow of the tree ran the white, glaring street, Oro's one and far-from-immaculate thoroughfare. Dogs scratched their itinerant fleas, or panted hungrily in the scanty shadows of wall or outdoor oven. The space in front of Temescal's tree was clean-swept, but beyond it, on either side, the way was strewn with litter — a shriveled cast-off shoe, curled like a piece of overdone bacon, a shattered bottle, gleaming like a handful of diamonds, a tin can battered flat, a rotting melon, split in a wide grin of reddish-brown pulp, the dark seeds filmed like the eyes of an ancient mendicant. Had Oro's one street been longer, more litter could be included.

The town was asleep — the hour, mid-afternoon. Temescal, however, was very much awake, and, withal, in a pleasant mood. Thus far he had earned what few

vantages he held. And now, within two hundred miles of the great city, captains importuned him, and Ministers of State sought his aid. He was not oblivious to this flattery, yet he tasted rather than swallowed it. He knew his people. And, in a measure, he knew himself. It would not do to reach too far, nor yet to hesitate.

The town was singularly devoid of warlike alertness. It seemed, rather, to be saturated with heat and rural somnolence. It is true, however, that the lean, swarthy figure lounging in the doorway opposite Temescal's tree, though seemingly asleep, was vigilantly watching the long road beyond the town. Nor was the jovial, fat, perspiring amigo, wedged in a chair outside the store, its proprietor, but one of Temescal's hardest riders and stoutest warriors. And again, the young, broad-faced, and flat-nosed youth, making indifferent love to the girl who tended the wayside goats, was not a villager, but, rather, Mercado's cousin, recruited in Escobedo. Nor was the vaquero who shod a horse in the shade of the acacia near the well. He was Temescal's chief dispatch-rider, temporarily a sentry. It had been given out that Temescal's bandidos were encamped in Oro. As a matter of fact, almost his entire force held to the hills south of the pueblo, with Mercado awaiting a courier from his chief.

Pepito, in the white cotton pants and jacket of a peon, a bandolier across his chest, and his much-polished carbine beside him, sat in the doorway of Temescal's adobe, guarding, as ever, his master's back. The duty was monotonous. Pepito greatly would have preferred Mercado's raiders and a midnight sortie.

Temescal snapped his fingers. Pepito answered the summons, saluting as he faced the captain.

'Shine my boots,' said Temescal.

Pepito marched to the rear of the adobe. 'Next he will ask for La Luz. He always makes me shine his boots before he calls her.'

Pepito returned with a brush, shoe-polish, and a rag. The task completed, Temescal tossed him a piece of silver, which Pepito promptly secreted in his mouth. La Luz did not approve of tipping salaried employees.

'Call the lieutenant,' ordered Temescal.

'But she is asleep, Señor Captain.'

'Then call a little louder.'

Temescal flicked a scatter of ashes from his shirt, smoothed back his hair, and frowned at the toe of his highly polished boot. La Luz, yawning and rubbing her eyes, came to the doorway behind him. Her soft, blue shirt was open at the throat, and the sleeves were rolled back to her elbows. She wore the gray buckskin breeches of a rural, yet, in lieu of cartridge belt, a crimson sash of knitted yarn. And she still preferred her comfortable sandals. In fact, she would wear no other footgear. That half of the polished bone handle of a small stiletto showed above her sash was rather a matter of accident than of deliberation. Usually the wide sash covered the little knife completely.

'What is it, now?' she asked, and, it must be confessed, a trifle petulantly.

Temescal pretended not to hear. He cleared his throat and tasted of the wine. So La Luz, imitating the brisk manner of Mercado, marched round and faced Captain Temescal, saluting with a comically stern, stiff gesture.

Temescal pretended not to see this. 'Good-afternoon, Lieutenant. Did you enjoy your siesta?'

'Until you called me, Señor Comandante.'

'Cease jesting — and sit down!' thundered Temescal. La Luz smiled alluringly and did as she was commanded. She liked to tease her bear, and she enjoyed his growling.

'Now, my golden one,' continued Temescal, 'I have some serious business to transact. I have several letters —'

'But my father taught me to read,' said La Luz, removing Temescal's pistol and snatching up the letters. 'Huh! The butcher in the North would join with you! Tear this one up' — and she did so, paying no attention to Temescal's snort of amazement. 'And the traitor in Juarez would be glad to confer with you. Send him a handful of cartridges for an answer; but keep this letter.' The third letter La Luz studied with formal attention, her head bent, and her firm, round neck boyishly pretty in the attitude. 'But this sounds honest,' she declared, tapping the paper with her finger-tips. 'And that your great friend should need you! I should like to see the City of Mexico.'

'And that is all?'

'What else? We are not sheep, to run back into the quicksands we have just passed safely. Only, Ricardo, if you go, I go with you.'

'But that is the difficulty. See, my golden one, I go to a conference with these Ministers of State, and I risk but one head — and fallen, of little consequence. And if I am successful, the better that I have risked no other than myself. So it is in me to advise Mercado of both

possibilities, ride to Leon and take the train to the city. It will be in my favor that I make no show of force, but play the game with the other fellow's cards. Do you not see the wisdom of my plan?'

'No. Because you feel, inside, that you are still Captain-General of Rurales, and can walk down the street and people will salute you. Our dog Bombo once fell into a marsh. When the sun had dried the mud on his back, he looked like a great wolf. Seeing him coming toward the sheep, Pepito shot him, thinking he was a wolf. But, inside, Bombo thought he was a dog all the time.'

'I gather the import — though the simile is somewhat muddy. You think, then, that should I take a bodyguard of say forty of my boys, I should ride a safer road?'

'Why wear but one glove when you have two? All — or none. And then, the President's bodyguard, being rurales, will find old friends among our company — and there will be no killing, either behind the door or in the street.'

'You are quite right,' declared Temescal. 'That was my instant plan — the other was fashioned to test your judgment.'

'Some day you will pretend a plan and I shall agree with it. Then what will you do?'

'Make you a captain, if the plan succeeds. But I have in mind a milder costume. I would give you rich gowns, choice jewels — few but decisive — white silk stockings, a black mantilla, and a bright manton —'

'But these I wear will do. Give me, rather, some wine, Temescal.'

Always, among men, La Luz had unconsciously

adopted a mannish air when observing this benign and infrequent formality. Upon these rare occasions she charmed Temescal beyond all expression. It was, no doubt, her enjoyment that he enjoyed. La Luz raised the goblet in a gallant fashion, saluting, as it were, the rounding universe, broadly impersonal, yet comprehending all. Then the adagio, as she tasted the fragrance delicately, allowing the aroma its romance, nor hastening the delight. And wine, to her, was home, and the green meadow, the evening sunlight on El Gata's hills, the incense of the pines and mossy cedars, the color of ripe grapes, broad leaves and lusty vines, the golden glow of poppies, the cool purple of wild fleur-de-lis of the cienegas — fragrances, colors, memories vivified, ethereal, and vanishing like mist. And much of this Temescal saw mirrored in her eyes, wistful above the silver goblet's rim; or half-veiled as she gazed at the tilted cup as though she sought its final, deeper mystery. 'A proper deference and sincerity,' mused Temescal. 'And always a little wine left in her cup.'

La Luz put down the goblet, lighted a cigarette, and flicked the match away, quite in the offhand style of a dashing vaquero. She must not forget that she was a bandido, a lieutenant of bandidos, and nothing more or less, among them all.

La Luz never asked for privileges beyond her rank or because of her sex, yet she took many. If she chose to ride Temescal's war-horse, she did so, and he must needs ride the black thoroughbred. If she desired wine, she never poured it, but asked Temescal to fill the goblet; and while he knew that this was pure mischief on her part, he did so, too courteous to refuse the office. And

though she transferred his orders in their import, she often turned a word to suit her preference, but never to his ultimate disadvantage. Lieutenant La Luz would not tolerate quarreling among the men, if the quarrel edged toward a killing. She so exactly mirrored Temescal in this, and was so direct and fearless, that the hardiest among those hardy men thought twice and chewed his knuckle before he would draw and fight the quarrel out.

Once, while encamped in the Cañon Soledad, a vaquero had deserted his patron Aguilar, and had applied to Mercado — Temescal being asleep — for a place among his raiders. La Luz had not liked the man, and, learning that he had deserted his patron, she told him he was not of the stuff they employed. Observing that she was a woman in man's attire, the vaquero asked her, sneeringly, what hand she had in the argument.

'But Temescal's right,' she declared. 'I am his lieutenant.'

'More like his woman,' sneered the vaquero.

La Luz went for her knife, but Mercado caught her arm. 'The pig is drunk,' he said.

'I'll make him sober!' cried La Luz.

'But, no!' said Mercado. 'You'll get hurt.' And thrusting La Luz aside, he shot the man down. 'Take his horse,' he told a bandido; 'it is a good horse. But dump this sleeper in yonder arroyo. He is too near camp for a dead one.'

And now, as Temescal rested on his precarious laurels, filching a few moments of contemplative ease from importunate Time, he gave his eyes the pleasure of a vision — briefly, La Luz attired as he had seen her when

first he entered Alejandro's house, yet not holding a jarro of wine in her arm, as then, but in its stead the tiny Temescalita — a bundle quite as stimulating to his speculative mind as any wine. A young mother, fiercely tender, who would cuddle, spank, and otherwise efficiently attend the waif's requirements, nor yet enslave herself in the occupation. As for Temescalita's higher education, he thought he could administer that course, himself. Strangely enough, Temescal's all-embracing vision did not admit even the shadow of Juan Sepulveda or Alejandro — merely Alejandro's home, his meadow, his daughter, and his hills. But then visionaries — poets and the like — are selfish folk. Otherwise they would be like all the rest of us — conscious philanthropists.

Across the way, the swarthy and silent sentry, lounging upon the doorstep, gestured with his thumb. Temescal's vision vanished. La Luz tossed down her cigarette.

'A rider from Mercado's camp,' she said, as a dusty horseman pounded up the street, swung down to salute the captain, and hand to him a letter.

Temescal glanced at the address and thrust the letter in his shirt. 'No answer,' he declared brusquely, and waved his hand.

'Captain-General Don Rodrigo Ruiz instructed me to wait for an answer,' said the courier. 'Your pardon, Don Ricardo, but have you forgotten me? I am Vincente Sarmiento Valladares, cousin of Doña Mariquita Valladares, and lieutenant of the President's bodyguard.'

'I thank you for the information — and your trouble. Will you not rest and refresh yourself?'

'If there is to be an answer to the message, I would. If no answer, I go at once.'

'I regret to hasten your departure — but there is no answer.'

The courier bowed, gazed for a second at La Luz, who in turn glanced nonchalantly at his lithe and handsome figure. Saluting Captain Temescal, the messenger mounted and swung away in a cloud of dust.

La Luz, curious and piqued because Temescal made no movement toward reading the mysterious letter, employed silence as a means of discovering its import — yet Temescal ignored the silent interlude.

Finally he rose and summoned the sentry from across the way. 'Tell Mercado to break camp at once. We shall ride to Leon, and entrain for the city to-morrow. Advise Mercado that I have been summoned to confer with the President.'

The courier departed. La Luz, lounging nonchalantly in her chair, glanced up at Temescal. 'Did you read that through the envelope?'

'Yes — and much more. Have Pepito get my horse.'

La Luz never asked for privileges, yet indeed she took many. She had Pepito saddle the black thoroughbred and fetch him round to the casa, before she told him to get Temescal's horse ready. Meanwhile, Temescal dispatched another courier to Leon — the message a requisition for railway equipment sufficient to move eighty men and horses to the City of Mexico. Being too far south to commandeer a train, Temescal enclosed a banknote with the message, as surety for the requirement. He then retired to his room to make ready for the journey. When he came out, he was surprised to see the

black thoroughbred saddled and standing in front of the casa.

'For whom?' he asked Pepito.

'La Luz.'

'So? Where is the lieutenant?'

'Here,' called La Luz, appearing in the doorway. She was dressed for riding, and carried her saddle-bags on her arm. As she slung the saddle-bags and tied them down, Temescal asked her where she was going.

'To exercise my horse,' she replied saucily.

'I shall leave for Leon within the hour,' declared Temescal, frowning.

The black horse plunged and reared as La Luz mounted. 'You see, he needs exercise,' she said, laughing as she reined the animal round and swept out to the street.

'La Luz!' called Temescal, but she had already angled from the roadway and was riding at a gallop across the bleak wasteland that lay between the pueblo of Oro and the southern hills.

Temescal strode to the table and poured himself a cup of wine. It would seem that he did not observe this benign formality with proper deference. He officiated hurriedly and beneath a heavy frown. 'Damn a woman parading as a man!' he muttered, yet politely mentioned no name. He drew the recent letter from his shirt. Doña Mariquita had written a clever and careful note, which, failing proper delivery, would not disclose too much; yet to Temescal it said a great deal, implying, as he read between the lines, a restitution of his estate and office, preference both social and political, and a prestige even greater than he had formerly enjoyed if he

would but listen to a voice that had mourned his absence, that now implored his return, and was at the moment engaged in petitioning for his pardon. Though much of this was cast in figurative phrase, the import was clear enough.

'But where was this voice when Ruiz succeeded to my place?' mused Temescal. 'And why no investigation of my rumored death? My former prestige is obliterated. My present rifles are the spokes of this new wheel that would roll Ruiz under, and me to the top again. Sacaton! I have a chance to scratch my ear. But where is the knife concealed? I should like to know.'

Accompanied by Pepito and another, Temescal set out for the hills to join Mercado and march eastward to Leon.

Meanwhile, La Luz, ascending the foothill trail to the bandidos' rendezvous, talked with an outpost sentry while she allowed her horse to breathe. A courier had recently passed — no one else. It was a hot day — and had the señorita any cigarrillos? She had. And she exchanged them for a grateful smile and a dictionary of thanks. Was Captain Mercado in camp? He was, so far as the sentry knew. The thoroughbred tossed foam from his bit as he moved briskly on up the trail.

Mercado's men were already saddling and gathering up their equipment. The old rural stood in the shade of a cypress, silently surveying his busy troop. He nodded to La Luz, and reproved her for using her horse so hard.

'If I did not, he would use me harder,' said La Luz. And then, 'Mercado, who is Vincente Sarmiento Valladares, who lives in the City of Mexico?'

Mercado glanced at her shrewdly. 'He is, I think, re-

lated to one of the same name, who is the President's friend.'

'Is there a Mariquita Valladares, and is she married?'

'But you shoot fast! I don't know his wife.'

'But you know me! And you had better tell me!'

'Does the lieutenant ask, or does La Luz want to know?'

'Your friend asks.'

'Well, amigo, I can tell you that Doña Mariquita is unmarried, young, beautiful, and even more headstrong than you, and has many friends among the great ones. Her father is of Chihuahua, and very wealthy. I have heard that much. Is Captain Temescal in Oro?'

'It may be. I saw him there this afternoon. I shall ride with you to Leon.'

'Then you also are going to the big city?'

'Of course! Why do you ask? Do you think I am afraid?'

'Anything but that, Lieutenant. But *I* am afraid. There are too many good-looking women there. Me, I like a safe life.'

CHAPTER XXXII

UPON entering the City of Mexico, the train which carried Temescal's troopers came to a stop opposite the Calles del Encino, below the great railway shed, called, with charming disregard for its architectural nakedness, 'Estacion de Buena Vista.' Yet this is not altogether a misnomer. A few short blocks beyond this grimy shell of smoke and steam and clatter lie vistas royal, historic, and alluring. A visiting alien, once, in careless rapture called the city 'A fine old picture in a new frame.' To Temescal, however, it appeared not so fine a new picture in an old frame. Even in the brief few months he had been away, the city had changed appreciably. Anticipating some of the less obvious changes, he had arranged quietly to disembark his men and horses along the Calles del Encino. Here the incidentals of food and inspection were attended to. The city in general was not aware of the arrival of the troop.

Attired, equipped, mounted, and drilled as rurales, this free company inspired some little curiosity, even among a populace weary of war and accustomed to a daily show of arms. There was an air of individual efficiency and recklessness among the bandidos which easily distinguished them from the indifferent soldiery, and even from their local prototypes, the Republican Guard.

Deploying into the Calles Estaciones, they moved in close formation across the broad thoroughfare that

borders the Plaza Mayor, swung slowly past the Zocalo, and halted, facing the Cathedral of Mexico.

Temescal spurred his horse round with a flourish and faced his men.

'My children,' he said as he swiftly surveyed the ranks, 'but one among us has been invited to the city upon this occasion — that one, myself. Hence, there has been no public reception, no flowers, no music —'

'But we can make our own,' called a voice.

'— and no pretentious or insincere formality. I go to confer with the President. As the invitation mentions but my name, I go alone and unattended. Meanwhile, my lambs, your good shepherd Mercado will attend you. There could be no nobler pasture than this place, yet, should he have occasion to seek another, follow him. I shall return within the hour.'

'The Palacio Nacional?' queried Mercado.

'No. The Cadena. I confer with the President alone.'

Following Temescal's departure, Mercado signaled to Lieutenant La Luz, with whom he talked aside, and briefly. La Luz nodded and took her place in the company. Mercado glanced at his watch, returned it to his pocket, chewed the end of his long, sweeping mustache.

'The old goat eats his beard,' murmured a rear-rank trooper. Those nearest him laughed.

Curious citizens gathered in little groups and watched the troop, commenting only in attitude, hardly daring to express themselves otherwise. Trolley cars clanged and grumbled in and out of the plaza. The horses of the bandidos mouthed their bits and fretted. A trooper sneezed. Another gazed open-mouthed at the great

cathedral. Three foot-soldiers, straggling past, paused for a moment to survey Mercado's command.

'Which side are you for?' called Mercado.

'We do not know,' replied the foot-soldiers. 'Our officer has gone to find out. When he returns, we shall tell you.' Laughing, they moved on.

'Which side are you for?' mocked a bandido, turning to a companion.

'The outside,' replied the other. 'I do not like this climate.'

Meanwhile Doña Mariquita Valladares, excessively annoyed because her footman had twice returned to her carriage to inform her that Don Ricardo Rayon had not yet arrived at the station, allowed herself the luxury of scolding the footman roundly.

'But Don Ricardo was to have arrived at ten o'clock. It is now eleven. Return to the agent and tell him to advise me of the whereabouts of Don Ricardo immediately, or I shall see that a more intelligent person fills his place.'

The footman — who was of that English type imported from Chicago for Mexican consumption, so to speak — held a tight mouth, bowed, and again departed. While she waited, Doña Mariquita's sharp little teeth and sharp little tongue were employed with a bon-bon. She consumed the bon-bon as daintily as a cat laps milk. In fact, Doña Mariquita's movements and attitudes were luxuriously feline. She dressed expensively, yet always with the good taste so easily acquired when one's father is wealthy and one's designer of costumes is becoming so, in Paris. The Valladares family were more Spanish than any Castilian of Old Spain, and, if there

was an Aztec twig or so upon the family tree, these grew toward the wall, where little sunlight fell. Doña Mariquita's eyes were large and dark and beautiful. Her mouth was small, childishly petulant in its curving perfection, and as pretty as it was insincere; her figure slender, indolently graceful, and subtly arrogant. All told — or nearly all — the señorita was as exquisite as an orchid, and as disassociated from the common soil. She had a shrewish elbow.

Presently the footman returned with a uniformed official, who explained, apologetically, that the officer whose duty it was to observe the arrival and departure of notables had just learned from his deputy that Don Ricardo Rayon had not entered the Estacion, but had disembarked his company at the farther end of the approach, promptly at ten o'clock; since when they had partaken of breakfast in the Cafe Simpatica, following which they had assumed military formation and had marched toward the Plaza Mayor.

'But why did you not inform me of this?' said Doña Mariquita, and not at all pleasantly.

'But I have just informed you,' replied the official, 'having but just received the information myself.'

'Insolent!' cried Doña Mariquita, curling her lip.

'From such a lovely and distinguished señorita, I accept the reproof as a compliment.' The official bowed gallantly.

Doña Mariquita gave him a brief glance of contempt, and five dollars in gold of the nation. The official forgot the one as he pocketed the other.

'Drive to the Plaza Mayor,' ordered Doña Mariquita.

But Temescal the elusive was not to be found in the

Plaza Mayor, nor any armed troop significant of his presence.

Having allowed his lambs to contemplate the great cathedral for exactly fifteen minutes, or approximately the time it would take Temescal to reach his destination, Mercado, on his own initiative, had withdrawn from the plaza, marched to the Cadena, and had drawn up his men, as though for parade inspection, in a long line fronting the unofficial home of the President.

In front of the comparatively small house stood Pepito holding Temescal's horse, and his own.

Doña Mariquita's glittering equipage drew up to the curb, her footman swung down, and the señorita stepped daintily to the portal. She had no need to present her card. Her name gained her immediate recognition and admittance.

Mercado reached down and brushed a fly from his horse's shoulder.

'You asked about the Valladares family,' he said, as though talking to himself. La Luz, beside Mercado, curled her lip and sat very straight in the saddle.

'Doña Mariquita is the real politician,' he declared.

La Luz, gazing at the doorway across the street, caressed the smooth handle of the little knife in her sash—doubtless not conscious that she did so. The spirited horses of the Valladares equipage tossed their heads impatiently. The footman stood rigidly beside the low carriage, staring straight ahead, seeing nothing. The coachman's solid back was stiff with dignity. Not even the cockade in his glossy hat trembled. Temescal's troop, alert, employed the minutes in keen, easy comment, with subtle strokes at foreign servants carved of

wood. This Mercado enjoyed exceedingly, but showed no trace of it.

The door of the President's house swung back. Doña Mariquita appeared, followed by the martial figure of Temescal, his sombrero in his hand, and — valgame Dios! — carrying the lady's tiny parasol!

'But we shall have fireworks!' Mercado muttered to his mustache.

Temescal showed the lady to her carriage gallantly, yet she hesitated, the toe of her pointed slipper on the low step.

'I would inspect your bandidos,' declared Doña Mariquita, meaning, 'I *will* inspect them.' And passing round the back of the barouche, she surveyed the long line of swarthy fighting men. Doña Mariquita's gaze rested for a moment on Mercado, passed him, and became fixed on La Luz. 'A handsome young officer,' said Doña Mariquita, her dark eyes round in affected amazement. This, then, was the amasia bonita of Don Ricardo, of whom her courier cousin Vincente had spoken. Doña Mariquita smiled patronizingly. 'Poor young fellow! His jacket is too tight across his chest.'

Slowly the face of La Luz was suffused with a dark tide, yet she held herself straight, and stared over Doña Mariquita's head.

'Do not disgrace the parade,' whispered Mercado.

'Did you address me?' queried Doña Mariquita.

'But, no, lady. I spoke to my horse.'

Doña Mariquita affected a sigh, and languorously turned away as though bored — which she was not.

'The young officer is handsome,' she said, approaching her carriage, 'but utterly without manners.'

'My boys are fighters — not courtiers,' declared Temescal, his voice a trifle louder than Doña Mariquita's proximity demanded.

'Of course, my Ricardo,' said Doña Mariquita, laying her gloved hand on Temescal's arm possessively, and with an affectionate gesture. 'You have my permission to deliver your message to your officer.'

Temescal assisted the lady to her carriage, and, crossing the street, handed a slip of paper to Mercado.

'The Paseo de la Reforma,' said Temescal. 'We have been allotted quarters in the Castle.'

'The Castle?'

'Yes. The President's Bodyguard.'

Temescal returned to the carriage, stepped in, and was swept away in a clatter of hoofs and jingling harness. Doña Mariquita's hand rested lightly on his arm as she talked earnestly.

CHAPTER XXXIII

URGED by the President to affiliate himself with the great Valladares interests, which interests would control the balance of power in the present desperate political situation, Temescal found himself obliged to make a prompt decision. He must either marry Doña Mariquita and turn such prestige and wealth toward maintaining the governmental policy as it stood, or, ignoring the opportunity and the lady's obvious preference, again take to the hills and chance it on his own. Meanwhile, the populace, as distinguished from the gentility, applauded the sudden spectacle of his daring as he rode the precarious crest of popularity — where or how he landed was strictly his own affair. His assumed name 'Temescal' pleased the peons. They were for him, so long as he was visible above the turmoil.

As for Temescal's private estate near Colima, the property was, as the President put it, in suspense, and merely incidental to the immediate question. However, Temescal was presented with a commission as Captain-General of the President's Bodyguard, which paper was in reality a pardon and safe-warrant for himself and his bandidos. The ruler of Mexico was making an heroic but futile attempt to hold his power, even while the people were clamoring for his resignation.

Because of her arrogance, Doña Mariquita saw no deeper than the surface. She saw only that which she chose to see. She was so much a part and parcel of the

old order of autocracy that she could not comprehend even the possibility of a change. Hence she did not appreciate Temescal's hesitancy when she importuned him to accept the President's advice as a 'political necessity,' with which phrase she cloaked her own most ardent interest which was to become the wife of one who eventually might become the ruler of Mexico. She thought that Don Ricardo Rayon, backed by the Valladares influence and pocketbook, would be well equipped for such an enterprise. He was a courtier, a warrior, a diplomat, of a vigorous mind and body; and while he was not an aristocrat, he possessed at least enough refinement to appreciate the Valladares' preferences.

To hint at this was not too difficult. National conditions made the topic a most natural tributary. In the Valladares casa, fronting the Paseo de la Reforma, Temescal, guest of Doña Mariquita, enjoyed the rare distinction of dining with her alone, in the seclusion of the patio. Maneuvering an artichoke leaf tipped with salad dressing, Temescal illustrated his contention.

'But, most adorable señorita, halfway up the tree, one may sit on a limb and possibly enjoy the vista. At the top, one's attention is given to hanging on, and to little else.'

'You have strong hands and a clear head, my Ricardo.'

'And, gracious lady, a dislike for altitude.'

'Since when?'

'Since I was born. It grows upon me.'

The air in the patio was heavy with exotic bloom. A fountain tinkled, and the marble cupid who blew a soundless concha puffed his round cheeks through a

trembling film of water which swathed him like a transparent garment. 'Maximilian and his whiskers!' mused Temescal, who was not ardently fond of French affectations and architectural subtleties. He preferred the barbaric simplicity of a meztizo's adobe.

Temescal tasted good wine, and became of a warmer countenance. He smoked a cigarrillo and admired Doña Mariquita's exquisite figure, as well as the modulations of her voice and her charming intimate manner. He considered himself an arbiter of elegance in these discernments — but what man is not?

The luncheon concluded, Doña Mariquita wisely refrained from further discussion of politics, but addressed herself to encouraging the vanity of the masculine ego. She sighed gently, her fine eyes half-veiled, her face alluringly pensive. She regarded Temescal suddenly, flattering him with unspoken admiration — and as suddenly she looked away. He had thought he knew this attractive lady well — their names had long been associated in the capital. In fact, it was taken for granted by almost every one, except Temescal, that he would marry the Señorita Mariquita. They had often been seen together, driving in the Paseo de la Reforma, or at the Teatro Nacional. High social functions nearly always included them. Now, however, Temescal revised his former impression. He was just beginning to get acquainted with the lady.

They arose, and Temescal accompanied her to the gardens, where they sauntered down a pathway between slender cypress trees.

From rude outlaw camp and thorny desert trail to this cool, spacious garden place of flowers and hedges,

shrubs, and formal vistas framed by shady arbors, was a transition so abrupt that Temescal felt imprisoned and out of tune with the conventional excellence of it all. The truth of the matter is that Temescal, of late accustomed to establishing his own rough boundaries, found the gardens petty, toy-like, and depressingly artificial. The flowers were forced and tended, flaunting their exotic extravagances like imperious courtesans. Being a person of wide discernment, Temescal preferred a modest and isolated flower. The shrubs and hedges were shorn and shaped in patterns which marred their natural trend. The shady arbors were deliberately contrived to frame the formal vistas. Even the etching of vines that enriched the gray stone walls was determined by the calculated intervals of their placing. While fond of any form of pastoral loveliness, he regretted the exactness with which the conventional restricted nature. The gardens of Valladares and Doña Mariquita were much alike.

As a mirage overlays the actual, without utterly submerging it, so there seemed to rise out of the spacious garden the phantom of a craggy mountain-side. A blue flower came tumbling down, fell at Temescal's feet.

Startled, he stooped and picked it up — Doña Mariquita's tiny handkerchief. They were standing in the lane of cypresses.

'Thank you, Ricardo,' said Doña Mariquita softly.

His hand touched hers as he returned the handkerchief. Just how it happened is not recorded in the little notebook. However, Doña Mariquita's slender hand and the inconsequential handkerchief remained in Temescal's broad grip. He squeezed both, gently. It was,

perhaps, a brotherly squeeze, but Doña Mariquita was not his sister. As it had been ordained from the first — which covers all poetical excuses — Doña Mariquita petitioned with her eyes, and eloquently. Temescal would have been ashamed — for her sake — if he had ignored such an obviously sincere petition. He kissed her, not with great passion, but quite satisfactorily. For a brief few seconds she was thoroughly a woman, exultantly surrendering to the only man whose voice had ever thrilled her. But Temescal, so to speak, had withdrawn from the field, realizing the subtle potency of the enemy. He was saved an awkward acknowledgment of this retreat, as was Doña Mariquita a realization of it, by the faint lisp of footsteps on the garden pathway. He straightened his shoulders, cleared his throat, soundingly. Doña Mariquita found occupation for her hands, reaching up to pluck a sprig of the fragrant cypress.

'One of the gardeners,' she murmured with a petulant shrug.

Temescal nodded.

'But, no!' Doña Mariquita was staring at the approaching figure. 'It is your handsome officer.'

Temescal turned. 'La Luz!' he cried — when there should have been no great occasion for surprise at the appearance of a hesitant lieutenant of rurales.

La Luz halted, saluted, marked Doña Mariquita's color. 'Manuel Mercado quarreled with a soldado raso at the Castle, and shot him. He is dead.'

'Mercado?'

'No — the soldado. Manuel has been arrested.'

'Hell's business! For what reason?'

La Luz smiled wickedly, and glanced at Doña Mariquita. 'Only that the soldado, who was drunk, cried out that Don Ricardo Rayon was a traitor, hired by the Valladares to murder peons.'

'Strumpet!' cried Doña Mariquita. 'Liar!'

'Neither—but my lieutenant,' said Temescal quietly. 'You will excuse my haste, Doña Mariquita. Mercado is a fool. Lieutenant, I shall require your horse.'

'I fetched your own, Captain Temescal.'

'My gratitude.'

'You forget your hat, Don Ricardo.'

'Thank you. I kiss your hand. Adiocito.'

While Temescal was distressed by the melancholy news of Mercado's arrest, he was not so distracted as to ignore the fact that La Luz had remained silent beneath the lash of Doña Mariquita's anger. Always capable of speaking for herself, La Luz had, in this harsh instance, simply stared at the lady as one might stare at a small, vicious dog snarling behind a fence. Just what subtle reason had restrained La Luz, Temescal could not imagine. He was hotly aware that La Luz had seen him kiss Doña Mariquita. La Luz had come down the garden path unobserved and unheard.

'Where is Mercado?' questioned Temescal as the two rode down the paseo toward the Castle.

'I do not know, Captain. He was taken away by four of the police.'

Temescal knew that he would have to see the Governor. The magistrado could do nothing. 'Give me what money you have with you.'

'But, yes.' Swiftly La Luz divested herself of the money-belt and gave it to Temescal.

'I shall not need the belt,' he said, emptying it and offering it to La Luz.

'Then throw it in the street. I carry no more money for you.'

'Quite so! Damn Mercado's temper! As for you, you may report to — but now you are next in command — report to the Devil!'

'I salute you,' said La Luz, touching her sombrero.

Temescal whirled his horse, and, regardless of the slippery pavement, rode off at a gallop. Presently, regardful of the many passing vehicles and staring faces, he held his horse to a brisk running walk, and, frowning, regained his dignity.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT eight o'clock that evening, Manuel Mercado was escorted from the carcel by two strange rurales, forced into a closed carriage, and with one guard beside him and the other on the seat with the cochero, he was driven to the Bosque of Chapultepec and told to alight. A bundle was thrust into his hands.

'Change your clothes,' ordered his guard. 'And quick about it.'

'If I am to be shot,' said Mercado, 'I prefer to be shot in my uniform. At least you will allow me that much?'

'We will allow you nothing! Hasten!'

'So it goes,' declared Mercado philosophically. 'This morning I was second in command of the President's Bodyguard. For stopping the mouth of a vile pelado, who cursed my commander, I am to be shot.'

Mercado effected the desired change rapidly, the air being keen.

'Now, back into the carriage!' commanded his guard.

'Do I get another ride — and for nothing! Well, make it a long one. You need not stop at all, on my account.'

'Your journey will be long enough,' said the rural who accompanied him.

'Then suppose you give me a cigarette. I don't ride in a carriage very often, but when I do, I like to smoke.'

'But you will get no cigarette from me,' declared the guard. 'I have no orders to entertain you.'

'You are not a rural — you are a Jew,' said Mercado.

'You have taken my good uniform, and will not even give me a cigarette in exchange. I had rather be shot by a Christian.'

To this the guard made no retort. Mercado chewed the end of his long mustache. He wondered if his captain had not heard of his predicament.

After having traversed many long and unfamiliar streets, the carriage stopped suddenly.

'You will accompany us quietly or it will go hard with you,' said one of the guards.

Slowly getting his bearings, Mercado finally discerned the long roof of the station of the National Railways. He thought of making a dash for freedom, but decided to postpone the risk.

Entering the station, Mercado was hustled into an empty, third-class railway coach. He had scarcely sat down when Temescal entered. The guards saluted, and left the two together.

'You made a nice mess of it!' said Temescal.

Mercado felt tremendously relieved.

'I did my best, Captain. I regret only that he was not twins.'

'Well, the thing is done. As you are no longer a rural, but an escaped prisoner, I shall address you unofficially. I thank you for defending my good name. I managed to obtain your release, but you will have to leave the city. The killing of the soldier has been magnified to a national catastrophe. It is cried in the streets that all who dare lift their voices in criticism of the Government are to be butchered by Temescal's assassins. The nation has gone crazy. Presently it will be every man for himself. Meanwhile, you will attend to a small matter for

me. Here is your ticket, and money for your expenses. You know the country north. Go to Santuario. Ask for the Señora Carmelita Flores, whom you will find more substantial than her name would imply. Tell her that it will please me to have my adopted daughter Temescalita with me in Morelia, where she will be cared for and educated. Once you reach the railway, you will have no difficulty in transporting the child. When you arrive in Morelia, you will engage a carriage and drive to my hacienda.'

'It shall be done, Captain. But what if your daughter should refuse to come along with me? I am in the clothing of a peon. She may not like my looks.'

'If you were in uniform, you would get into trouble with the northern soldiery. As it is, you are a poor widower, taking your motherless child to her aunt. The infant will be your passport.'

'Infant! But, Señor Captain —'

'Quite so. I have an appointment with the President. Go with God — and keep a tight mouth. Do not forget your present quality.'

And, muffling his sarape about his face, Temescal swept out of the car, leaving Mercado submerged in a sea of gloom.

A family of meztizos came in and disposed themselves and their many belongings on the hard seats. They seemed quite at home, the father smoking his corn-husk cigarette and the young mother placidly nursing her baby. The top of the infant's head glowed like a ball of copper.

Mercado glared at the meztizos. 'Of a truth, I am a poor widower, as the Captain said,' he soliloquized.

'But as for conveying infants about the country! Maria Purissima! I am no commissary! When he said "his daughter," I imagined a señorita at least able to wipe her nose. Chihuahua! But I pay a price for my liberty! He is a keen one! "The infant will be your passport," he says, as though I could tuck it in my pocket. He gave me no chance to refuse. Now yonder sweating infant bawls in spite of its mouth-stopper. Maldito! But it is that the Captain gets his revenge. It cost him something to bribe the policia, that they lend me my life. And now I pay the interest on the loan. Next time I am arrested, I think I shall tell them to shoot me, and have done with it!'

The train moved out from beneath the long roof of the station. The meztizos settled themselves for the night. As Mercado reflected, the family camped in the car as though they owned it.

The Indians travel much in Mexico.

Returning by motor to the Cadena, where, because of the rioting in the streets, a heavy guard had been posted, Temescal was admitted to the President's apartments. Here he found an old man, sick, and suffering with a toothache. The President seized Temescal's hand.

'We have known better times than these, my friend,' he said, his tired eyes, for a brief second, glowing with their old, familiar fire. Then, as Temescal made no comment: 'I tried to secure for you a new title to your confiscated estate. Don Vincente was stubborn; he said he would talk with you about the matter.'

'I thank you, my great friend.'

'You have made all arrangements?' queried the President.

'All. The General will escort you to Vera Cruz. I shall remain here with my men and guard an empty house, to cover your departure.'

The President winced and held his hand to his cheek. 'Had I a squadron of men like you, I should not resign,' he declared. 'The people say that I have forgotten them. It is the people that have forgotten me.'

Above the murmur of the city rose a shout, 'Muera Diaz!' repeated again and again. It would seem that the people had not forgotten.

The President took a folded paper from between the leaves of a book and gave it to Temescal. Temescal received the document, bowed, then saluted. He turned and left the apartment abruptly.

As he came out upon the steps he heard a shrill clamor in a near-by street and cries of 'Viva Madero!'

'And next?' said Temescal.

Dawn found the rurales still on guard, two sentries posted on either side of the approach to the house, and Temescal himself dozing in a chair in the reception room. The floor was littered with the stubs of many cigars.

A limousine, rolling swiftly up to the first outpost of the guard, was halted. A tall, lean, aristocratic individual in frock coat, silk hat, and fashionably cut trousers proceeded under escort to the house. He gave his name, which, when transferred to Temescal, gained him admittance.

'I would talk with the President,' said the visitor.

'Then, Señor' — Temescal deliberately ignored the other's name and title — 'you will first have to elect one.'

'You mean —'

'That if you would talk with the former President, the telephone is at your service. Pardon me if I remind you that it will be a long-distance message.'

CHAPTER XXXV

FACTS are so often the arrogant enemies of Romance especially when they are unclothed and unaccompanied by liberal interpreters. This may account for several blank pages in Temescal's little book, following the terse notation, 'Received fifty thousand pesos. Disbursed ten thousand pesos.' These figures undoubtedly are more significant as accents of character than as intrinsic evidence.

The few blank pages bear each its formal and consecutive date. Thus Temescal paid tribute to the turning of the wheel, though its squeaking in the interim is unrecorded. And when he wrote 'Chaos' following these few unillumined pages, it would seem that he considered that all worth a pencil stroke had ended.

Withdrawing his rurales from the President's abandoned home, Temescal proceeded toward the Castle of Chapultepec. His commission had expired with the abdication of the ruler of Mexico. Automatically, his command again became bandidos. Already they had earned the enmity of the insurgent partisans. The Provisional Government, marking time to the slow, democratic advance of the insurgent leader, would hardly risk employing a captain so notoriously the friend of autocracy. Hence, Temescal decided to disperse his command, that, singly, or in small groups, they might leave the city without attracting too much attention.

Incidentally he decided to have a chat with Don Vincente Valladares concerning several matters, includ-

ing Don Vincente's title to the Zamora hacienda, Temescal's former possession and home. This property Don Vincente had acquired, following the report of Temescal's death. The President had been unable to persuade Don Vincente to return the property to its original owner. Temescal, however, conceived an argument which he thought might be effective.

Deploying into the Paseo de la Reforma, the troop came to a halt in front of the Valladares mansion. Temescal dismounted and strode up the wide approach, his spurs twinkling in the morning sunlight. The door was opened by the Valladares major-domo in person, a significant circumstance.

The major-domo's sleek expanse blocked the wide doorway. If he had a neck, it was not visible between his ears and his shoulders. He was the physical reflection of the Valladares opulence.

'Don Vincente and the señorita have left the city,' he declared, even before Temescal addressed him.

'And no message for me?'

'None, Don Ricardo.'

'Strange! I had an appointment with Don Vincente. It is now ten o'clock.' Temescal stared at the major-domo's effeminately small feet.

'The family left at nine,' said the major-domo, and, although Temescal's manner was affable, the major-domo, somehow, wished that he had accompanied his master.

'Indeed! Pardon me, but may I address a note to Don Vincente? The matter is of some interest to him.'

'It will give me great pleasure to furnish you with the address of his agent,' declared the major-domo.

'My gratitude. I have neither pen nor paper with me. May I importune you for these essentials?'

'If you will step inside, Don Ricardo.'

'But I will!' And Temescal, closing the door behind him, turned and thrust the muzzle of his revolver into the startled major-domo's stomach. 'Now, where is Don Vincente? Empty your basket!' Temescal emphasized his demand by shoving the pistol a bit deeper into the major-domo's expansive meridian, gently but firmly.

'Co-Co-Colima,' stammered the major-domo.

'My gratitude! And now, your prominence, you may get yourself some of Don Vincente's most excellent American whiskey to restore your color. I am sorry I may not enjoy it with you. My respects to Don Vincente when you inform him of my visit.'

Mounting his horse at the gateway, Temescal addressed his men. 'My commission expired at midnight. Our only possible friend and hope, Don Vincente Valladares, has left the city. Henceforth, we are as we were, bandidos. Shall we disband and leave the city singly and unobserved, or retain our order and our insolence, and demand immediate transportation to Celaya? From there we have a choice of several ways. I call for a vote.'

'It is that we have earned a little ride from the Government,' said Sargento Jesus Alvarez, a Chihuahua renegade.

'Celaya!' cried the bandidos.

Temescal drew his commission from his pocket and tore it across and across. The bandidos watched the bits of white paper flutter to the pavement. Their chief was with them. Again he was outlaw, and a hunted man,

although the hunters had not yet assembled to track him down. They were too busy salvaging their own shoes.

At twelve o'clock, noon, Don Ricardo Rayon personally interviewed the assistant superintendent of transportation, requesting conveyance to Leon, a city eighty-odd miles beyond the railway junction of Celaya. The official was exceedingly courteous, assuring Temescal that a special train would be ready promptly at one o'clock. While Temescal held his men in the Calles del Encino, this suave railway official telephoned to the secretary of the provisional Minister of War, informing him of the requisition. After some delay the request was granted, but not, however, until the Minister of War had sent a code message to the comandante at Leon, informing him of Temescal's intended arrival. Temescal's bandidos had singed the whiskers of Leon upon several occasions. Thus the Minister of War, having dispatched his telegram, left it to the comandante at Leon to dispatch a dangerous partisan.

As a troop train, the special was given the right-of-way. By midnight it had arrived in Queretaro. Two hours later it stopped at the junction of Celaya, and here Temescal promptly disembarked his men, instructing the train crew to proceed to Leon according to official orders.

While crossing the level mile or so between the railway station and the town of Celaya, Temescal chose to ride at the rear of the straggling column, and beside his lieutenant, who immediately made herself unaware of his presence. For a while Temescal rode in silence, his head bowed, his eyes closed. He was grateful for the cool,

moist air of the fertile plains. La Luz, prepared to be displeased if he spoke to her, presently became displeased because he did not speak. Though bitterly jealous of Doña Mariquita, and grieved and angered because of Temescal's apparent infidelity, yet La Luz was quite willing to forget the lady and forgive the man — after having given him a round scolding. It was not that which she had witnessed in the Valladares gardens that angered La Luz so much as the fact that Mercado had not returned, nor did any of the bandidos know what had become of him. When La Luz had questioned them, they had frowned, or mumbled curses, or were silent. And as Temescal had said nothing about Mercado, La Luz inferred that her stanch friend had been sacrificed to the war-schemes of the great ones; that Temescal had not intervened to save him. And this she could not forgive.

'Are you also weary of this witless game?' Temescal spoke abruptly, and with bitterness.

'You speak to me?'

'Or to my horse, as you choose,' said Temescal.

'You always talk like that when you wish to hide something,' declared La Luz.

'But I hide nothing! Sacaton! If I forgot you long enough to kiss another woman, is that unforgivable? You must remember that I also forgot myself, for the moment. Does not that rather equalize things?'

'You make puzzles,' said La Luz. 'I was not thinking of that woman in the garden. She was playing a game, Temescal. Twice she looked at me and tried to make me ashamed, and afraid of her. But her eyes told me that she was afraid of me. If she had not been, would

she have called me a bad woman and a liar? Do great ones speak thus to the poor servants of their friends?'

'I apologize for her — and for myself.'

'But you need not. If she had been a brave woman, I should have killed her with my knife. Then you could not have her.'

'But, bless your sincerity, I do not want the lady.'

'You are now a bandido.'

'Even so, I would not marry the lady. There is not a girl in Mexico that I would look at twice, except La Luz.'

'Did you shut your eyes when you kissed that woman with the wicked mouth?'

'For God's sake! But I'll close your pretty eyes with kisses —'

'My father said men talked like that to girls.'

'Then at least I have proved him a truthful man. Did he also tell you that girls like that kind of talk? Perhaps not. I am glad to have heard your voice again, my dear comrade. Scorn me, reprove me, scorch me with your frown, knife me, even, but do not sulk!'

La Luz frowned in the darkness. This was not the tone of a penitent. 'I think of Mercado,' she said. 'He was a loyal comrade.'

'But he was! A trifle hasty, but as faithful as the sun. When I think of his present mission, I am inclined to pity him.' And Temescal actually chuckled. La Luz was silently furious.

'When I recall the surprise and despair in his face as I bade him farewell —' Temescal hesitated.

'And you allowed him to be taken from us, to serve your own purposes, Captain Temescal?'

'Yes, as a matter of discipline. But what else could I do?'

'I do not know. I only know that I hate you.'

'That is encouraging. I thought you were numb.'

'I am alive to hate you, Temescal.'

'If your intuition is at fault, it is not my desire to correct it. I would be loved or hated for that which I am, and not for that which I might so readily affect. Meanwhile, I suffer your disapproval.'

'I will obey your orders, Captain' — and La Luz saluted.

Temescal spurred ahead to halt his men and issue final instructions before entering the city of Celaya.

Entering the town, Temescal gestured toward the dawn which gilded the eagle on the great shaft in the center of the plaza. 'He looks behind him, and thus guards his back. I shall choose him for my emblem. I am through with looking forward, farther than my shadow.'

That the Indians of the Nayarit range already called Temescal 'The Eagle Looking Backward' is neither here nor there.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WEST of the wooded mountains of Morelia the ever-winding road swept down and across placid green valleys dotted with grazing cattle, and up along verdant slopes shadowed by pines and bright with countless wild flowers. The neat ranchitos were rich in tropical fruits, the forests of the hills were lined with game trails. Temescal's troop met many ox-carts and laden burros. Often enough, a barefooted peon, guiding a primitive plough in the fields of the lower country, would pause to watch the dusty cavalcade. Nearing the Indian pueblo of Teloca, Temescal sent one of his men ahead to survey the immediate country and arrange for provisions. Meanwhile, the bandidos rested, lounging beneath the mountain pines, smoking and talking or snatching a few minutes' sleep. The rear guard finally arrived. The advance guard returned, reporting the way safe and the natives of Teloca quite willing to supply the rurales — as the bandidos called themselves — with food and vino de membrillo, and feed for their horses.

'For which they shall be liberally paid,' declared Temescal, which was his customary and significant announcement before entering a village.

In the pueblo of Parecho, a few days back, one of the bandidos had stolen a chicken, and another thirsty adventurer had possessed himself of six or seven bottles of wine, and, lingering behind his companions, had become sincerely drunk. Had he not returned alone to Parecho and endeavored to carry off the angry housewife

from whom the chicken had been stolen — thus compounding the offense — Temescal might have overlooked the matter. As it was, he disciplined the erring one, and made a daily practice of announcing his willingness to shoot any man caught looting the friendly natives.

Thenceforth there was no looting. In fact, all the way from Celaya to Parecho and beyond, the bandidos had been received hospitably by the curious mountain-folk, who regarded them as rurales patrolling the coastwise valleys and hills to make the roads safe for those who travelled unarmed.

Arriving in Teloca — too small a place to furnish lodging for eighty men, and too populous with fleas to furnish comfortable lodging for any save a native — Temescal paid for the stores requested, and made camp in a mountain meadow a mile or so beyond the pueblo. Four fires were lighted, and round each were grouped twenty men, save for the sentries posted north and south of the camp. The horses munched the corn in their morrals. Presently two villagers arrived, each with a huge sack of tortillas. The wine was fetched in a creaking cart laden with two small casks. The goat's meat had arrived on foot, and was already in strips, which several of the bandidos were broiling at the fires. Roundabout rose the encircling forest, and here and there above the tree-tops shone an early star.

Having eaten and refreshed himself with wine, Temescal withdrew from the busy circle round the fire. With his back against a tree, he surveyed the barbaric camp, and smoked a cigarrillo. Pepito fetched Temescal's sarape. The air was keen, and the bandidos kept close

to the fires. La Luz, unlike the conscious heroine of the too obvious and consciously carpentered romance, did not affect a graceful attitude, sigh with an extravagant disregard for buttons, gaze pensively at the firelight's fading glow, or, standing on the top of a cask, entertain her infatuated admirers with an impromptu fandango. But, no, señora, señorita, and señor! La Luz sat as near the fire as was possible without scorching her sandals, her short hair flung back from her forehead, and her hands busy mending the rent in a bandido's chaqueta. Moreover, it happened to be the jacket of him who had appropriated the wine and had become so sincerely drunk in Parecho. La Luz was pleased to mend, impartially, the garments of her companions, and perhaps all the more pleased in this special instance, because the jacketless one stood in the shadow of Temescal's disfavor.

If La Luz sighed, it was because of her weariness. The company had been four days upon the road. And if she glanced occasionally at the fire, it was because she wished it gave more light.

A bandido laid fresh fuel on the fire. The pine branch snapped and crackled. A spark flicked out, unnoticed by La Luz, and alighted like a grasshopper on her brown, unstockinged ankle just above the thong of her sandal. She jumped up, dropped the jacket, and hopped about on one foot.

'Huy! Zape!' she exclaimed, 'but the thing startled me!'

'Otra! Otra! Encore!' cried the amused bandidos.

Laughing, La Luz sat down. 'But it is mended,' she said, and tossed the jacket to its owner.

Temescal nodded reminiscently. 'And she rode with us on the raid of San Bartolo without a whimper!'

Presently Temescal laid aside his sarape, clapped his hands. 'Amigos!' His voice carried to the farthest camp-fire. 'This is our last camp together.'

The bandidos, huddled about the fires, murmured their surprise, glanced toward each other, shrugged their shoulders. La Luz, her legs crossed, her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped under her chin, sat staring into the flames. She was not surprised at Temescal's declaration, because she knew he was about out of money; that the nearer his hand came to the bottom of his purse, the more carelessly he distributed pesos. And he had overpaid extravagantly the natives of Teloca. That he would not raid and provision at the expense of the poor and friendly peons, she also knew.

'To-morrow we shall take breakfast with Don Vincente Valladares.' Temescal tossed his ungarnished statements among the puzzled bandidos much as one would toss oranges to a group of street urchins. They could scramble for them, and the most oranges to the quickest. 'We shall disband at my hacienda. Thence to the Sierra de Nayarit the way is safe. None but my vaqueros ride the western slope.

'The unenlightened of the land clamor for democracy, which means the division of the great haciendas among peons unable to spell the simple word "thrift," or read the name of the candidate for which they are obliged to vote. We shall do better. I shall sell to Don Vincente Valladares my hacienda, and divide the moneys equally among you, reserving a slight commission for myself as agent of the transaction. With these sinews you may

strengthen your escape to whatever choice of fortune comes to hand. Thus I shall have established a real democracy, and possibly as lasting as that which the ignorant contemplate.'

'We'll squeeze the juice out of the orange!' cried a bandido.

'But the tree shall remain,' said Temescal. 'There will be no insolence, no swaggering, and no killing. This is a business matter, not a raid.' And Temescal gestured, establishing the period.

Some eight miles beyond their encampment lay the broad lands of the Valladares hacienda, a vast establishment of orchards, grazing-land, granaries, wine-press, and storehouses, the homes of the vaqueros and their families, the blacksmith-shop, stables, corrals, and incidental sheds — and, overlooking all, the hillside mansion, with its white portico, tiled patios, and walled garden surrounded on three sides by wide portales. The estate was in reality a feudal territory of many thousand acres, the laborers and tenants virtually slaves, and perhaps as comfortable and prosperous in this condition as they could ever become in any other service.

The Valladares hacienda was customarily approached from the seaward side, as the railway conveniently established its western boundary. The old wagon-road from Morelia across the mountains was seldom used, except by the local rancheros. Temescal's hacienda lay immediately to the west, on the verdant slope that ran toward the ocean. Don Vincente had long coveted Temescal's isolated holdings, that he might ride from his own doorway to the Pacific, upon his own land.

All of this was Temescal's familiar book, perused,

studied, or laid aside as the mood swayed him. That he disliked to relinquish it entirely, is more than possible — yet every book has its price. In this instance the price was fixed at fifty thousand pesos, not a startling sum for so excellent a property. Recalling Temescal's notation in a smaller book — 'Disbursed ten thousand pesos,' it would seem that he had decided to retain a disproportionately large commission for his services.

Temescal ordered the sentries to be relieved, inspected the commissary, had the unopened cask of wine moved to the spot where he intended to sleep, and bidding good-night to La Luz, who still sat beside the fire, he lay down beneath a pine and drew his sarape round him. 'And now I shall sleep,' he said. Yet Temescal did not sleep. Somehow, the declaration failed to operate. He closed his eyes, and enclosed myriad wakeful fancies. He tried the other side, and found it harder than the first. He leaned on his elbow, and smoked a cigarrillo. The tobacco was tasteless, and his annoyance made him more wakeful than ever. 'Must I be night-ridden by imagination?' he asked himself. 'It is not my conscience. I have hobbled that. Yet there is something in the air which my philosophy will not recognize. It may be that I drank too much wine, or not enough. Am I losing my grip on the mane of Chance? If so, the morning cannot come too soon. Sacaton! But the earth was never so unfriendly!'

Again Temescal rose on his elbow, and surveyed the silent camp. The embers of the fires had been deliberately extinguished. He could not see the horses, rope-coralled among the farther trees. Yet in the meadow, faintly lighted by the stars, he discerned the huddled

figures of his sleeping bandidos, each with his saddle at his head, and beside each figure a deeper shadow, like the long opening of a grave.

Over the silence came a faint, far wailing, which rose and subsided in a peculiar rhythm. Had Temescal been less oppressed of mind, doubtless he would have recognized the sound for what it was. Yet he did not, but heard it with the ears of imagination. The wailing sound grew louder, rose to a shriek, and subsided again. A bandido shrugged his sarape closer, and cursed sleepily. The reiterant wailing ceased. Temescal lay down — and immediately rose up again. Several of his bandidos were sitting up, and a murmur of voices passed among them.

The thing — whatever it was — continued to shriek at seemingly timed intervals. It approached the meadow, as though with deliberate malice.

'But I shall investigate,' declared Temescal.

'Send the driver and his crazy carreta to the Devil,' cried a bandido.

'But it is that it comes on like a nightmare!' murmured Temescal. 'Nothing can stop it!'

The cart drew from the road. A dimly lurching shadow, it entered the meadow — a shadow which cried out at each lurch as though in torture.

'Make a light!' ordered Temescal.

A piece of paper flared. Some twigs were kindled. Then came an explosion of surprise. 'Mercado!' cried a voice, and the name ran from man to man like the ripple of waves.

Following the hubbub of excitement and oathful surprise, another voice was heard. 'Yes, comrades, it is Mercado. Where is the Captain?'

'Here!' — and Temescal strode over to the wagon. 'But who in hell —' he paused. In fact, for the first time within the recollection of his companions, Temescal's jaw dropped, and he became speechless. Meanwhile a bulky figure — that it could be the Mother-of-Many! — descended laboriously from the wagon, the usual animate bundle in her arms. And still Temescal could not realize the how or why of it. He stammered, endeavored to raise his sombrero — but his arm was without strength.

'Mercado!' he finally managed to gasp.

'Si, Captain! I have returned. You were not in Morelia. I followed a day behind you, and the next, a longer day behind. Your stepdaughter is well. She is asleep in the cart with the other seven. I —'

'Asleep? In that screeching ambulance?'

'Si! When the cart stands still, they howl — the smaller ones. When it moves, the wheels howl and the children go to sleep. So it is that I have traveled much by night, to save my ears. But you have already met my wife, no?'

'Good God!' cried Temescal, and in the same breath; 'but it must have been a hard journey for the little ones.'

'Only from the railway, at Morelia. There I purchase the cart.'

'You are well, señora?' queried Temescal.

'I am very well, Señor Captain. And the children, also. Manuel is very handy at caring for them.' And the Mother-of-Many gestured proudly and possessively toward her latest husband. 'He has much patience, and he loves children.'

'Quite so, señora. He has always been the most gentle amongst us, and thoughtful of others. Who but my recent captain and your present husband would have had the thoughtfulness to provide so competent and excellent a nurse for Temescalita; or the courage to — to make this journey to my camp? You have secured a jewel of many sides.'

'Oh, he does well enough. He has yet to learn about properly caring for the little ones. But I shall instruct him.'

'No doubt about it. Is my Temescalita in good health?'

'Any one who has heard her howl would know that her lungs are sound, no?' said Mercado.

'Manuel!' The señora's reprimand was mild, but firm. She smiled upon Temescal and regarded him with admiring eyes. She liked a man with shoulders. 'But the little one is fat and very pretty, Señor Captain. Shall I have Manuel get her?'

'Heavens, no, señora! I would not have the children disturbed for the world! Let them sleep. Let us all sleep! Pepito, attend Captain Mercado and his family. Get them some food and some wine. Move briskly!'

'Strange that my husband should have been your friend' — and the Mother-of-Many sighed.

'Yet he was,' declared Temescal, staring, even glaring, at Mercado's back as the weazened little rural pulled many blankets and bags and bundles from the wagon. 'When you have made your family comfortable, I shall talk with you, Mercado.'

'Si, Captain. In a minute.'

In a minute! Was this Mercado, or merely his mus-

taches? Temescal bowed to the Mother-of-Many, wished her a good-night, and walked slowly toward his tree.

Presently Mercado approached his captain, who was still on his feet, in spite of the recent shock. 'I got your stepdaughter,' he said, his voice tuned to a low, confidential pitch. 'But I had to marry Carmelita to get the infant. She would not give her up otherwise. Carmelita looks mild, but, Captain, she has a very strong mind. Yet she is adorable!'

'Quite so! I congratulate you, Manuel. You have accomplished wonders.'

'And she helped a lot, Captain!'

'I could never doubt it! Quite incidental to your family affairs, we disband to-morrow.'

'To-morrow!'

'No later. First, however, I shall call upon Don Vincente. He is at his hacienda.'

'Si. And I can tell you something else. In Morelia I had it from an old friend — Pedro Suarez, who lost his ear in the battle of Leon — that Don Vincente's cousin, Sylvestre Ruiz, was seen in Morelia with Don Fulano de Tal, who is a General in the Insurgent Army. It would seem that Don Vincente has turned his coat.'

'I surmised it several days ago. Yet I thank you. May you enjoy a peaceful night.'

'And you also, Captain. I'll be getting back to the wagon or Carmelita will — will worry.'

It was singularly unlike La Luz, that she had not appeared to greet her stanch friend Mercado. That she was aware of his return could not be questioned. The whole camp was aware of it. Possibly, because she had

believed him dead, La Luz could not adjust her emotions to his sudden return. Then she realized that she had wronged Temescal in regard to Mercado's disappearance.

Shortly after Mercado had returned to his wagon and his extensive family, La Luz stole over to Temescal's tree. 'Ricardo!' she whispered.

Temescal, muffled in his sarape, was standing with his back against the pine, staring at the dim outline of Mercado's wagon. 'But, yes?'

La Luz held out her hand. Not immediately comprehending her mood or her motive, Temescal hesitated, then would have given his hand in a hearty renewal of their old companionship: yet, with a gesture, La Luz was gone. In Temescal's hand lay the little knife, its blade and haft still warm from the warmth of her body.

Not more clearly could she have expressed the completeness of her surrender.

CHAPTER XXXVII

BEFORE dawn had touched the high tops of the pines, a fire was kindled in the mountain meadow, and by its light the shivering bandidos fumbled with morrals. The horses were saddled while they ate their corn. The cask of wine was rolled up to the fire. Temescal, summoning his bandidos, asked for a rifle, and with its butt dashed in the head of the cask. He sent Pepito to Mercado's wagon to get a dipper. One by one the men stepped up, drank, and stepped back. Temescal was the last to drink. The dipper scraped the bottom of the cask. Mercado came stumbling up to the fire.

'Get Manuel some milk,' said a bandido.

'And a spoon,' suggested another.

'But, no! I drink with the Captain!' And, seizing the cask, Mercado raised it, tilted, and drank the last of the fragrant vino de membrillo. He spat out the dregs, and heaved the cask into the fire. 'And now,' he said, curling his long mustache, 'where is the fight to be?'

'In your wagon, if your wife should wake and see you playing the rooster,' said a companion.

Mercado glared at the speaker. Temescal, having taken his wine, returned the dipper to Mercado.

'There will be no fight, old fire-eater. We go to visit Don Vincente Valladares. You had best keep to the road, and continue to my hacienda.'

'If there is to be no fight, then why so many?'

'I would pay my men before we disband.'

'I see,' said Mercado, screwing up one eye. 'But I

think I shall go along and help you with the payroll. My wife can drive the mules.'

'Manuel!' The voice was mild, yet the intonation firm.

'In a minute!' Yet Mercado made for the wagon, as he spoke. Here he found La Luz talking with his señora. 'Hola, comrade!' cried Mercado. 'How do you carry yourself? In the darkness I thought you were a man. It's a good thing I heard your voice! We are going over to pull old Don Vincente's wig. Are you going with us?'

'Who is Don Vincente?' queried Señora Carmelita.

'An old goat that the Captain has in mind,' replied Mercado blandly.

'But I thought we were to go to the Captain's rancho, my beloved.'

'That comes later, my adored one. Let us start at once. We shall wash the children to-morrow. We can feed them when they wake.' And Mercado immediately began to harness the mules.

From Mercado's enthusiastic description of the lieutenant, the Mother-of-Many had imagined La Luz to be a boisterous and vulgar amazon. The señora found La Luz a rather handsome, quiet, and companionable young woman, and obviously competent in taking care of herself. La Luz had wished to look at Temescalita, but the bandidos were mounting their horses, so she bade the señora adieu, and took her place in the company. Dawn shone upon the exodus. The bandidos were in high spirits.

Before arriving at the diverging road which led to the Valladares hacienda, Temescal divided his men into

two companies, a precaution which was not fully appreciated until later. Carefully Temescal chose the men who were to accompany him. La Luz was not called, but remained with the second company, which Temescal posted in a barranca south of the hacienda. He told his men that he anticipated no trouble, that he expected to return within two hours at most. With a gesture of farewell, he led his troop toward the high gateway of the rancho.

Some three miles down the road, an old wagon creaked and rumbled along in a light cloud of dust. A portly and good-looking woman occupied most of the driver's seat. She held a swathed bundle in her arms. Stiffly upright beside her, Manuel Mercado held the reins.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

TO avoid the possibility of an argument with the tenants and employees of the Valladares hacienda, Temescal followed the right-hand road after entering the gateway. This road, passing south of the village, swept through a shady avenue of great oaks, and round the base of a low rise which hid the Valladares casa from the pueblo.

Temescal dismounted on the broad terrace fronting the portico. His manner was unusually brisk and pleasant.

'I shall not be long,' he said, as he gave the reins to Pepito. 'We shall have breakfast before the flies have warmed their backs.' And instructing his sargento, Jesus Alvarez, to station a guard at each of the doors and windows of the mansion, Temescal strode up to the entrance.

He was saved the necessity of inquiring for Don Vincente, as Don Vincente, nervously anticipating the arrival of an utterly dissimilar visitor, opened the door himself. The hour nor the occasion could fully account for Don Vincente's formal garb, or his appearance at his own doorway.

'But if it is not my devoted friend!' cried Temescal, bowing. 'I had thought that my so-early arrival might have disturbed you. Yet I see that you are undisturbed.'

Don Vincente bowed stiffly. 'To what may I ascribe your visit, Don Ricardo?'

'To that which occasions your unanticipated alert-

ness. Doubtless you were hungry and rose early. My companions have not had breakfast.'

Don Vincente glanced at the hardy troop. 'Send them to the pueblo. My major-domo will feed them. Will you be pleased to enter?'

'My gratitude. Your pardon, but we are now democrats. My company will remain here. I dine with my hungry constituents. Yet they are as patient as wolves — so I will accept your invitation to discuss privately a small matter.'

Entering the library, Don Vincente proffered a seat to Temescal, and waited for him to speak.

Temescal deliberated, waved his hand. 'I came to ask you for the hand of Doña Mariquita in marriage,' he said finally. He glanced up at Don Vincente's lean, arrogant face.

'But that is ridiculous, Don Ricardo! You are —'

'I know it. That is why I asked you. I merely wished to satisfy my social conscience. You were about to say that I am a bandit. I am. So was Porfirio, once. I have asked to marry your daughter. I have been refused. Accept my thanks.'

'You insult me!'

'Or am I simply honest? Would my appeal have been ignored a week ago?'

'That, Don Ricardo, could have been answered a week ago. Now it has no bearing on the question.'

'Perhaps not. But it still may exercise a leverage. May I speak to Doña Mariquita?'

'My daughter is asleep.'

'I accept your refusal. We shall have done with the ridiculous. Now for the sublime. I offer you my haci-

enda, roads, water-rights, rentals, buildings, appurtenances, and implements for fifty thousand pesos, preferably in oro nacional. You must admit that the price is modest.'

'Your offer is gratuitous. I hold title to the property.'

'Under our former Government, Don Vincente?'

'Of course. You are aware of it.'

'Then your title is invalid. Our former Government has gone up in smoke. We are now a democracy, free and equal, especially as to the length of our ears. For instance, I cannot divide my acres among my brothers, because they are of different minds, and land is not portable. But I may divide the money.'

'Your proposal is ridiculous. My title is sound.'

'But have you considered your health?'

'Do you threaten me, Don Ricardo?'

'Is my solicitude a threat? In fact, is a threat necessary?'

'There is no need for bickering, Don Ricardo. We can come to no agreement, unless it comprehends your acknowledgment of the new Government.'

'You ask the impossible. You are anxious to be rid of me, doubtless contemplating a visit from those who might find me an awkward fellow to deal with — hence, your unexpected appearance at your own door and your formal attire. You are not opaque, Don Vincente. Nor is the door in the safe behind you. Through it I see snug packets of bank-notes and little sacks of gold which were to become food and ammunition for the Maderistas. And this money you acquired through your friend, our former President! Of this money I shall reserve fifty thousand pesos to his memory.'

Don Vincente's lean, sallow face became flushed with anger. He rose and stood with his back to the safe. 'You can't bully me, Ricardo.'

'Because I am not a bully. Put the money on the table. I want it.'

Don Vincente was neither a coward nor a fool. He opened the safe and counted out the amount demanded.

Temescal had but put his hand to the packet of banknotes when Doña Mariquita abruptly entered the library. 'Colonel Sepulveda and the secretary have been waiting —' she paused, recognizing Temescal. 'I did not know it was you,' she said coldly. And, turning, she left the room.

Temescal heard her speak to some one. Immediately there was a scraping of chairs and the sound of hurrying feet.

'You overreached yourself,' declared Don Vincente. 'Will you leave quietly or shall I introduce you to Colonel Sepulveda?'

'Thank you for the concession to our former friendship. I'll meet the Colonel. I have met other colonels. In fact, I may kill your colonel —' Temescal paused, and stared as the officer strode in.

Ignoring the other's surprise, Temescal observed, first, that this colonel was unarmed; secondly, that he was none other than Juan Sepulveda.

'Juanito!' cried Temescal, grasping Juan's hand. 'Have you forgotten your old friend Importunio? And you are a colonel! Yet that is not strange. A few days ago I was a general. So you journeyed north, as I suggested? And now you are south, at the suggestion of another. But we have missed you, Juanito! Mercado,

La Luz, Pepito — we have missed you! And to think that we who parted in the shadow of a misunderstanding should meet here in the bright sun of Don Vincente's hospitality! The wheel turns. And would you believe it — Mercado is married!'

'Doña Mariquita informed me —' began Juan.

'Of course she did! And you were informed by the most beautiful señorita in Mexico, perhaps. And one of the wealthiest. You are to be envied.'

'This man, Ricardo Rayon, has just stolen fifty thousand pesos from me,' declared Don Vincente. 'Since the abdication he has turned bandit —

'Before the abdication, Don Vincente! But that is no news to my old companion, Juan. We were bandidos together. Juan, come to the window. You know fighting men when you see them. A few of my boys. My reserves are posted elsewhere. But what of that, between friends? You may judge the cloth by the sample. Sacaton! But it is good to see you again!'

'But, señor —'

'It was inevitable. I knew you would say it. It recalls —'

'I am here to protect the property of Don Vincente. It would seem that you have robbed him.'

'Ridiculous! He robbed me, when I was supposed to be dead. You recall a certain colonel and an uncertain rock? Then it was that I perished. Your host, Don Vincente, acquired my hacienda Zamora, but forgot to pay me for the property. I jog his memory. Could I do less?'

'I know nothing of these matters,' declared Juan. 'It is my duty to protect the property of Don Vincente.'

'Quite so.' Temescal stepped to the library door and turned the key. 'And now, Juanito, be careful what you do. There is a sentry posted at each window. Each sentry has orders to shoot any one careless enough to imagine a window a doorway. Sit down. Pardon me if I remain standing. Incidentally, you are here in uniform. Where is your detachment posted?'

Juan glanced quickly at Don Vincente. Temescal smiled.

'Naturally you arrived ahead of your regiment. But one may be so far ahead that he is actually behind. Do you remember the Red Barranca, Juanito?' Temescal stepped to the window and opened it. 'And the fat one who would have blinded me? You were a loyal comrade, Juanito.' Temescal stepped through the opening. 'Good luck, my colonel! Go with God — and never leave your pistol in your bedroom.'

'And now for breakfast,' said Temescal, striding across the terrace and mounting briskly.

'But it will be a hot one!' A bandido pointed toward the distant oaks shading the lower road. The approaching troop of Federal cavalry, an advance detachment of the regiment commissioned to guard the Valladares hacienda, rode leisurely up the shady avenue, anticipating nothing more unusual than a late breakfast. They had detrained from the station of Zocoalco at daybreak, and had been in the saddle for several hours. Observing the bandidos — or, as they supposed, a company of rurales — the cavalry halted. The bandidos, in close formation, came on at a trot. Colonel Juan Sepulveda appeared on the terrace and shouted a warning to his men. Temescal spurred to a gallop, and, followed by

his forty warriors, swept down upon the unready cavalry as an eagle dives to grip a crouching rabbit.

Temescal's bandidos jerked their carbines from their scabbards, and employing a familiar but disconcerting trick, split suddenly into two diverging currents, raking the troop with an oblique fire as they dashed past on the run. Before the disorganized soldados could recover, the bandidos slid their horses to a stop, whirled and, firing singly, emptied saddle after saddle, as the cavalry dispersed among the oaks.

'We left three,' declared Sargento Jesus Alvarez, as the bandidos drew together and ceased firing. The sergeant gestured with a bloody hand, unaware that it lacked all four fingers. A bandido, leaning forward heavily, coughed, and slid from the saddle. 'Four,' said the sergeant, staring at the stump of his hand.

'Count five,' said Temescal as a bandido dismounted, and, on hands and knees, rocked back and forth and swung his head, as he slowly bled to death. His lower jaw was shot away.

'But I'll have his horse,' asserted another bandido. 'My plug got it in the lungs.'

Temescal, like the Eagle Looking Backwards, was watching the road that led out to the distant gateway. Beyond the live-oaks rose a thin cloud of dust which drifted sideways in the light breeze. Beyond the first cloud rose a second and, still farther down the road, a third.

Immediately Temescal sent Sergeant Jesus Alvarez to the bandidos hidden in the barranca. 'If Mercado is there, inform him that a regiment of Federal cavalry is within a quarter of a mile of the Valladares casa.' A

solitary horseman crossing the open land south of the road would create no suspicion. Temescal's men, although screened by the oaks, were in a trap. Survivors of the troop that had blocked the road were re-forming on the terrace in front of the casa, where Colonel Juan Sepulveda, furious because of what he had witnessed, swore that he would wipe out the bandidos if it cost him every man of his command.

Temescal's warriors, reloading carbines and pistols, scattered among the oaks, and prepared for some close-range sharp-shooting. They knew that the troop on the terrace would not expose themselves on the road, but attack from the rear. To do this they would have to climb the hill, which meant time lost in detouring toward the pueblo.

Meanwhile, the second company of cavalry, having heard firing in the direction of the casa, came on at a trot. They did not discover the ambushment until their captain, a lieutenant, and several horses were down in a struggling heap. Following their invariable rule, the bandidos first picked off the officers, then the horses, knowing that in a slowly moving body of cavalry, a horse, frenzied by a wound, is more disorganizing than a volley.

Unofficered, the cavalry charged blindly into the ambush. The bandidos, firing from cover, picked off the cavalrymen until, routed, they spurred for the open and their reinforcements.

'Up the hill!' called Temescal.

Reloading as they rode up the shady hillside, the bandidos drew together, and dismounting crawled to the crest. Below, in a shallow valley lay the pueblo, its

many roofs shimmering in the high sun. The northern hillside was thickly dotted with oaks, which both screened and disclosed the occasional glint of a rifle, the head and shoulders of a horse, or the top of a cavalry man's hat. 'They ride into it,' said Temescal. 'Colonel Juanito is displeased, or he would dismount his men and attack on foot.'

From the ridge Temescal was able to observe the movements of the farther detachment, which had divided, one company marching toward the pueblo and the other toward the open, western slope of the hill. It was evident that the Federal troops planned to surround him, which would mean annihilation. Temescal counted his cartridges. He had a scant fifty left.

'It appears that we are to leave by another and a wider gateway,' he observed, as he glanced toward the distant entrance to the hacienda. 'And soon,' he added as he saw still another body of horsemen moving up the road.

'Shall we begin to pick oranges?' questioned Sergeant Jesus Alvarez, who had bound up his right hand with a red bandanna and held his pistol in his left.

'But, no. Wait until we can shake the tree.'

It seemed to Temescal that the latest detachment of cavalry was anxious to overtake the first. They came on at a gallop. He could see the twinkle of their carbines in the sun. He stared across the shimmering green of the fields below. A faint yell sounded in the distance. Then came the reiterated pop and rattle of rifle-fire. The surprised cavalry swung round to face the charge of forty bandidos led by Manuel Mercado.

'But La Luz!' whispered Temescal. Immediately

withdrawing his men from the ridge, he ordered them to mount and go to the assistance of their comrades. As for Colonel Juan, he enjoyed his proverbial luck. Arriving at the crest of the hill, he beheld Temescal and his bandidos spurring down the road between the oaks.

Reinforced by Temescal's company, the bandidos again charged the Federal cavalry, who held together, fighting sullenly. Horse after horse broke riderless from Temescal's troop. A third charge, in which Temescal lost a score of fighters, and the battle became a massacre. Maneuvering in the open, the few remaining bandidos drew a wide circle round the cavalry and, dismounting, fired across their saddles. The cavalry broke, scattered and fled. The bandidos rode them down singly, and left no wounded to suffer.

His command defeated, wiped out, Colonel Juan Sepulveda retreated to the casa with a mere handful of troopers. These he detailed to guard the doors and windows. All but two of the servants had fled to the hills east of the hacienda. Don Vincente, Colonel Juan, and the secretary of the Liberal Committee remained in the dining-room. The secretary paced nervously up and down, gesticulating, but saying nothing. Don Vincente sat at the head of the table, a stern, aristocratic old man, too arrogant to think of flight, and too wise to attempt it. Doña Mariquita tried to be nonchalant, but her trepidation was obvious. Occasionally she glanced at the handsome colonel, who sat staring at his untouched breakfast.

'But he will not loot,' said Juan, as though answering a question.

'He will murder every man in the room!' cried the

secretary, wringing his hands. 'As to what will become of the women —'

'Temescal is not a beast,' declared Doña Mariquita. 'I think he is a little crazy, but he is not a beast.'

'No. Simply a murderer and a thief!' growled Don Vincente — adding with supreme contempt — 'and a half-breed.'

'A meztizo? But, no!' said the secretary. 'Don Ricardo Rayon has been always a gentleman.'

A trooper saluted in the dining-room doorway. 'Captain Temescal says his bandidos are looting the pueblo and getting drunk,' declared the soldier. 'They have got beyond his control. He would talk with you, Colonel.'

'Tell him to go to the Devil!' growled Don Vincente.

Doña Mariquita's pretty face grew pallid. 'But, no. Admit him. I shall receive him.'

Juan bowed, and followed the trooper to the door. Here he found Temescal and a thick-lipped mozo whose face was streaked with blood. It was Pepito, who, recognizing Juan, grinned hideously.

'Do you surrender?' queried Temescal.

'Myself, only to the bullet,' declared Juan. 'Yet Doña Mariquita has consented to receive you. I speak for her.'

'Quite so. You *speak* for her. *Do* something, idiot! My boys are drunk. They are out of hand. They have set fire to the pueblo. Did you not arrive here by motor?'

'Of course.'

'Then, while the south road is clear, load Don Vincente into your car and run for it!'

'But, señor, Don Vincente is stubborn. He —'

'Then knock him on the head. Chloroform him. But freight him out of this! My deepest affection and regard to Doña Mariquita. I kiss her fingers — by proxy. Adios, young soldier!'

Arrived at the barranca, Temescal found Mercado's cart. The Mother-of-Many was placidly attending to the numerous requirements of her brood. La Luz, red-eyed and angry of countenance, smiled as she saw Temescal, and ran to him.

'My man!' she cried, 'you are not hit? What of the fight?'

'Fight! It was a massacre. My boys had been too long upon the road, and idle. If there are ten left, they are a lucky ten. They loot the pueblo. Hop into the cart, my golden one, and we will get out of this.'

'But where is my Manuel?' asked the Mother-of-Many.

'Yes,' echoed La Luz, 'and where is my horse? When Jesus Alvarez came and told of the soldiers, Mercado seized my horse. Before the señora knew what he was about, he had all the men flying after him down the road. I was so mad at him for taking my horse that I wept like a silly child. If I had not been sitting in the wagon talking with the señora, he would not have got my horse. And I did not have my knife.'

'Which is as well. I keep it.'

'But where is my Manuel?' queried the Mother-of-Many.

'It is that he gives drink to a wounded companion. He will return.'

'He had better,' declared the señora quietly.

'And we had better leave here at once. You have the money safe, señora?'

'That which the sergeant gave to me is under the seat. Little José's diapers cover the money. It is safe. None would know it is there.'

'Excellent! Let us go.'

That the Mother-of-Many was willing to leave without her latest husband would seem singular if it were not that she cared for her children more than she could ever care for a mere man. The possibility of Mercado not returning was as nothing compared to the safety of her brood. The Mother-of-Many took husbands for granted, but not the snub-nosed little angels with whom she had so competently surrounded herself. These were not to be had by merely wishing for them. Moreover, Temescal had a way with him, and the Mother-of-Many always admired a man with shoulders.

Hence, when Mercado, as drunk as a man may get and still manage to stay on a horse, rode up to the barranca, he found no team of mules, no wagon, no children, and no wife. He felt a bit relieved, and considerably hurt: relieved because he had anticipated a reprimand, hurt because he had been so heartlessly deserted.

'Must have been the next barranca,' he mumbled as he turned and rode toward the western hills.

As he came to a bend in the road, a long, shining motor-car rushed past him. When his horse came to earth again, Mercado enjoyed the vague notion that he had caught a glimpse of a uniform and the veiled figure of a woman. 'Wasn't my Carmelita, anyway,' he muttered.

Some four or five miles beyond, in a wooded ravine into which his horse had taken him, Mercado came upon a wagon. Slowly it dawned upon him that it was his wagon. The Mother-of-Many was seated upon a low rock, nourishing her youngest. Mercado accepted the phenomenon philosophically. Dismounting, he steadied himself against his horse and surveyed the gypsy camp.

'I'm here!' he declared finally, trying ineffectually to curl his long mustaches, that he might present a fierce front to the company.

'Manuel, you are drunk!' The voice was gentle, but convincing.

'I am just a little dizzy from the sun, my pigeon,' said Mercado. 'If you will stand still a minute, I'll explain. We had a fight. I took just a little, because it is dangerous for a husband to get drunk. That is why I guess I am sober. I like a safe life.'

La Luz was making a fire. Temescal was not in the camp. Pepito was binding up a wound in his leg.

CHAPTER XXXIX

TEMESCAL had left his social, political, and military identity on the spacious tiled portico of the Valladares casa, as a tramp might leave hat, trousers, and coat in a less conspicuous place, in making a change to garments more suited to a hasty disappearance. This event was almost coincident with the great earthquake which so ominously accompanied the arrival of democracy in the City of Mexico. Temescal had vanished like a torch thrust suddenly into a pool. So abrupt had been his disappearance that but little smoke remained, and this was quickly swept away by the importunate winds of a fresh disaster. Another President had come, and gone.

Temescal was not forgotten on the instant. His name was written too large in national headquarters, and branded too deeply upon certain other quarters, to be erased by the easy rubber of policy, or ignored by the uneasy rural districts. To some the name 'Temescal' was synonymous with distrust, hatred, and trouble. In others, it inspired affection and fidelity to a forlorn ideal — a kind of beneficence experienced in exercising beneficence, only celestial in anticipation and retrospect; or the far flight of an eagle, calling the spirit up to undreamed vistas; a forlorn ideal — as forlorn as satisfaction in triumph, or wealth, or achievement, or assurance that the ego will survive, or proof that the taxation of inadequate incomes is essential to good government.

So a mere name incited hatred and distrust, or inspired affection and fidelity, with the minors of regret, pity, and sympathy an extempore accompaniment.

Meanwhile, Doña Mariquita, having arrived safely in the City of Mexico, retired at once to the family residence, where, in the rich seclusion of her sleeping-room, she prepared to weep. Only a woman may enjoy the luxury of tears and preparing for them.

To state that the lady employed such adjuncts to her grief as handkerchiefs, smelling-salts, a mirror, a powder-puff, soft slippers, a gorgeously diaphanous peignoir, a pousse café, a few French expletives, and Temescal's photograph, would seem ridiculous, were it not for the fact that Doña Mariquita's maid assisted at this strictly feminine function. The maid had a lover. The lover, a clerk in the railway office, had a cousin. The cousin had a smattering of English — being employed in the customs of Juarez. The railway cousin corresponded with the customs cousin. The customs cousin confessed to an old, disreputable uncle named Mercado that he knew something about the great lady, Doña Mariquita Valladares. It seems that Mercado had paid his nephew a sort of flying visit, borrowed five pesos, collected the family news, and disappeared. From Doña Mariquita's withdrawing room to Juarez is a far cry, yet, relayed by gossip, it was not inaudible.

Doña Mariquita wept. She tore the photograph of Temescal into strips and pieces, and wept because she could not put the pieces together again. She threw herself on her bed in a passion of grief, and wept still more. Her maid administered smelling-salts and coffee in the order mentioned. Doña Mariquita was bathed, per-

fumed, combed, and powdered. She sent word that she wished to see her father. He came. The maid was sent from the room. A half-hour later Doña Mariquita's father was glad to leave the room. That was about eight o'clock in the evening. A few minutes past eight, Don Vincente telephoned to the Jockey Club — where many young officers congregate. A month later, Doña Mariquita was married to Colonel Juan Sepulveda. Six months later — there was much fighting in the interim— Colonel Sepulveda became a general. He assumed the Temescalian manner, but lacked the proportions, both physical and mental, of his erstwhile guide, philosopher, and friend.

Temescal had vanished.

Along the eastern foothills of the Sierra de Nayarit, upon a narrow and unfrequented road, Mercado's creaking wagon droned and bumped and jolted. The team of mouse-gray mules kept just far enough ahead of the wagon to avoid being run over. Beside Mercado sat the Mother-of-Many, the usual bundle in her arms. Occasionally she peeked into the upper end of the bundle and smiled, when she would cuddle the bundle a bit closer. Mercado, observing, gave each of his huge mustaches a quick twirl with thumb and finger, and cleared his throat of dust. He was absurdly jealous of his señora's attentions to her young, but this did not disturb the matron in the least. She was too serenely poised, too placidly aware of the futility of domestic argument, too great a mother, and too ample in every respect to resent these petty airs and affectations.

Following the wagon, yet not close enough to breathe its dust, trudged Temescal and La Luz. They drove a

lazy band of goats along the road. Temescal, clothed in blue cotton shirt, stout woolen breeches, and coarse shoes, swung a long staff and hummed a marching tune. A bright-hued handkerchief was bound about his head, confining his hair, black, glossy, and as thick as an Indian's.

La Luz, in her brown dress, sandals, and wide straw sombrero, was most obviously this goatherder's lovely daughter.

Temescal waved his staff at a goat which had lagged behind the others. 'Arre! Would you keep little José from his supper?'

'It is like a bugle when you cry "Arre!"' said La Luz.

'A dusty bugle. But I have done with bugles, my golden one.'

It would seem that Temescal had become a herder of goats.

Observing that La Luz had received his declaration pensively, in that she paused and stood gazing at the hills far to the east, Temescal delivered himself of a sonorous 'Ahem!' at which she turned and smiled.

'You were thinking of the green meadow?' he asked, waving his staff toward the mountain range.

'And of our home, which the bandidos burned,' she said slowly.

'What? Tears in your eyes, my golden one! But no!' And Temescal flung out his arm in a broad gesture, as one might whose enthusiasm knew no visible limitations. 'In the green meadow I shall build not a house, but a city! Nor will it be a cluttered hive of malcontents. I'll choose my citizens! And they shall be men familiar with

the soil and each shall have elbow room, but not too much. Great ranchos had been the curse of Mexico — patrons and peons, and no middle class. I shall establish a middle class — myself the example and progenitor. What I have learned I shall teach. First, a home for us, and for Mercado. Then a small school. The city will come after that.'

'A school, just for Mercado's children?'

'Do you doubt that there will be other children? Besides, Mercado isn't dead yet.'

'A school will cost lots of money,' said La Luz.

'We have it!' declared Temescal crisply. 'But who, observing our equipment, would imagine so? In fact I can hardly believe it myself — yet we have it. However, I was not thinking of the money, but of a proper name for our new city. We must have a name, even before we strike a level for the first foundation. A name — and we'll build to it.'

'What name, Ricardo?'

'Why! You ask that? There could be no other name for our new enterprise than La Luz.'

Smiling, La Luz drew herself up and saluted her captain as in the old days. 'It shall be as you say.'

Temescal laughed heartily. 'But such a girl!'

'The wagon — it is a long way ahead of us,' said La Luz, gesturing up the road.

'Ai! We must follow the wagon,' said Temescal. 'But three days and we shall be in Santa Rosalia. Thence to the green meadow will be like a song.'

Avoiding the broader highways, the larger towns, they journeyed through a land preëmpted by fierce war and fiendish banditry. They lived the life of gypsy

mendicants. They had disposed of their horses, their weapons, and such clothing as might betray them.

Because both Mercado and La Luz could speak the patois of the Northern peons, the travelers were welcomed by the pelados and gentualla along the way.

The wagon stopped. Mercado got down and lifted a child from among the many, and set it on its feet in the road.

'It would seem that it was not supper for which the little José cried,' observed Temescal.

La Luz glanced down. 'But one thing, my Ricardo. The Señora Carmelita has many children. And she counts your Temescalita as her own. Yet the niña is yours. You found her, and you cared for her.'

'Of a truth, but I can easily recall it! But what of that?'

'You seem content to let the señora keep Temescalita.'

'Most assuredly! The child is in very capable hands. Why should she not remain where she is?'

'Because I want her. I would have Temescalita for my own.'

Temescal frowned prodigiously. 'Santa Maria Purissima! But I had not thought of it! Have her? Of course, you may have her! Forgive me for my stupidity.'

Presently Mercado took up the little José. The cavalcade moved on, soon to stop at a sheltering cove in the foothills where they made their evening camp. Pepito, who always hunted for rabbits along the way, came in at dusk.

And this making camp was not so much a daily, monotonous task as a delightful occasion. First, Mercado

and Pepito unhitched the mules and gave them water and nosebags filled with corn — rich provender for mules, but then, Temescal was always generous. Then the children old enough to walk were summoned by name, and hopped down from the end of the wagon. This was Mercado's special regulation, a military habit and his pet indulgence. Tobelito was detailed to look after little José, and the little José was detailed to look after the still smaller Pedrocito, who in turn had in charge Chepita, who was supposed to supervise the adventures of the tottering Juanita, and Juanita was kept busy looking after her balance. The infant Temescalita and the Mother-of-Many's youngest each enjoyed the señora's generous and impartial attention.

Next Mercado gathered fuel and made a fire. La Luz milked the goats. This done, she helped Mercado with the cooking. Meanwhile, Temescal busied himself tuning the guitar. This fetched the youngsters round him — at a prescribed distance — and kept them from quarreling, falling into the fire, or getting kicked by the mules. The fire going, the pot simmering, the mules munching corn, Pepito and the children watched Temescal, their eyes and mouths open. Mercado made the inevitable coffee. The Mother-of-Many beamed upon the bearded and smiling Temescal.

And how he would sing! And how he could sing! Zing! Zang! and the guitar fairly sparkled with dancing notes. Pit, pat, and the children beat time with their hands, awkwardly and beautifully. The Mother-of-Many rocked the infant in her arms. Mercado poked the fire rhythmically. As for La Luz — but one must milk according to the goat and not the music.

Swinging into a slower theme, Temescal sang an old Spanish lullaby which fetched slow, happy tears to the eyes of the Mother-of-Many and caused Mercado to mumble and stare at the fire.

If the day had been especially trying and the travelers worn and dispirited, Temescal would put forth his finest effort. It would be 'The Ballad of Marching Men,' 'The King's Guard,' or the famous drinking-song, or a half-chanted, rural melody picturing some pastoral romance, whereat weariness would vanish, tense nerves become relaxed. They all loved music, and loved Temescal even more.

His former station, prestige, affluence — if he remembered these with regret, not one of his companions knew it. He was too good a player to frown at losing. Disappointment may have stung him, but it did not sour him. He loved too well the fragrance of the fresh-turned earth; the primitive grace of any natural flower, the green of meadows, the gold of ripening corn, the swelling curve and hue of a pomegranate, the neighing of horses, the drum-beat of the rain. Nor was he blind to a woman who walked with ease and showed a well-shaped ankle.

Temescal was no pessimist.

Still, his enjoyment of all these things was not a momentary or selfish enjoyment. Beauty observed and realized, he stored away. But first he skimmed off the dross with the ladle of philosophy, or blew a hotter fire and burned it up.

And this must be so, because he confessed it himself.

But one must follow the wagon.

Two months had passed since Temescal had disappeared; also two presidents. The wagon, with its treas-

ure and its treasures, arrived, one August evening, in Santa Rosalia. Soldiers were quartered in the western precincts of the town. Police patrolled the streets. The citizens were not garrulous, for no man knew who was his enemy or his friend. Few questioned, and still fewer answered.

Father Anselmo, of San Marcos, had just returned from a visit to a parishioner. The good father had been happy to dispense spiritual comfort, and pleased to acquire some vegetables, some fruit, and some wine. It was his custom, personally, to provide these essentials, since his acolyte had suddenly left the church, transferring his fanaticism to the Liberal army. The acolyte had become a soldier.

'Have you made out a list of the church properties?' asked Anselmo, as he came into the refectory and laid the bundles on the table.

'I have just completed it,' said Alejandro, 'yet I find one vessel missing from the count.'

'Indeed! And what one?' Father Anselmo leaned over Alejandro's shoulder and studied the new accounting. 'But there must be some mistake,' he finally observed.

'The cup was not there,' declared Alejandro stubbornly. 'I counted twice.'

'Then put the list aside. We shall have supper.'

They had but begun to eat their simple meal when they heard a knocking at the postern. Father Anselmo rose and answered the summons. In the dim light of evening he did not at first recognize the strange visitor, although the voice teased his memory. Finally he recalled, only too vividly, the former appearance of this unexpected guest.

'I would not disturb you, Padre,' said Temescal, 'were it not that we are in great haste to leave the city. Events have so changed my plans and purposes that, to accomplish others more profitable, I have become a herder of goats, and, with my family, an applicant for temporary sanctuary.'

'It would have to be temporary,' said Anselmo, and somewhat frigidly. 'Your influence cost me my acolyte. Following that terrible battle of the plaza, he left me and, I hear, has become a soldier.'

'But the Señor Alejandro is well?'

'And quite contented. He serves the Holy Church.'

'Good! He couldn't do better. Do you think he will continue to serve the Church?'

'Undoubtedly. He has become an acolyte. He is exceedingly faithful. Do you care to speak to him?'

'Most assuredly. And his daughter, who is with me—'

'Come in,' said Father Anselmo.

And so it was that La Luz and Temescal again entered the Church of San Marcos. Old Mercado had declined to go near the church, excusing himself with the plea that Tobelito had the stomach-ache. Pepito was also diffident, and remained with Mercado.

If La Luz anticipated an ardent welcome from her father, she was disappointed. Alejandro was, of course, surprised and glad to see again his daughter, but he could not forget her undaughterly desertion of him to become, as he quite naturally imagined, Temescal's woman.

After a conventional exchange of family endearments, Alejandro, a quaint figure in the gown of an acolyte, returned to his meal.

'He's a goner!' murmured Temescal, which, translated, might imply that Alejandro was now more the son of the Church than the father of La Luz. And, strangely enough, Temescal was not displeased.

'There is a little matter I would adjust,' declared Temescal, drawing a small, beautifully engraved silver cup from his blouse. 'This cup, retrieved from one who most evidently appropriated it — a scurrilous old renegade with whom I have had some dealings — I now return to you. He as much as confessed that he stole it. I apologize, not for him, but for the circumstance.'

'I thank you, my son!' cried Anselmo, seizing the chalice.

'That makes our count exact,' declared Alejandro, and he went on munching his carrots.

La Luz was grieved and puzzled. Her father seemed so strangely serene and detached. Yet there was really nothing strange about it. La Luz had transferred her allegiance to Temescal, and Alejandro had transferred his to the Church. His natural melancholy fitted well into the arrangement. Moreover, he experienced a content which he had heretofore hardly dreamed of. There were small duties, big books, placid hours of reflection, unsolicited consolations. Once a shepherd, Alejandro had become a sheep. Moreover, he felt that the ample cassock of the order hid his deformity.

Temescal cleared his throat. The air in the refectory was damp. 'Another matter, Father Anselmo, and we shall depart.'

Temescal took La Luz by the hand. 'You know this lady, and you know her devoted father' — Temescal's voice was like the sustained note of a violoncello —

'and I am also known to you. We would be married.'

Alejandro glanced up from his carrots, his mild brown eyes eloquent with surprise. 'His conscience troubles him,' reflected the shepherd.

La Luz did not blush nor stammer nor simper. She looked straight into Padre Anselmo's faded eyes.

'It shall be as my man says,' she declared.

'Always, I think,' said Padre Anselmo.

THE END

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